# DESI RAP

## HIP-HOP AND SOUTH ASIAN AMERICA

Edited by **AJAY NAIR** and **MURALI BALAJI**

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# Contents


Introduction vii
*Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji*

**Part I**

1 My Hip-Hop Life 3
*Vijay Prashad*
2 Polyvalent Voices: Ethnic and Racialized Desi Hip-Hop 17
*Nitasha Tamar Sharma*
3 Hip-Hop Agitprop 33
*Ajay Nair*
4 B-Boys and Bass Girls: Sex, Style, and Mobility in Indian American Youth Culture 41
*Sunaina Maira*
5 How Hip-Hop Helped an Indian Girl Find Her Way Home 71
*Deepti Hajela*
6 Making *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop* 79
*Raeshem Chopra Nijhon*
7 Outcaste 109
*Murali Balaji*

**Part II**

8 Spoken Word 125
*Swapnil Shah*

9 The Disjointed Artist 127
*Chee Malabar*
10 Beats, Rhythm, Life 137
*D'Lo*
11 Sounds from a Town I Love 149
*the1shanti*
12 Words from the Battlefront 155
*Utkarsh Ambudkar*
13 An Ear to the Streets and a Vibe in the Basement 163
*DJ Rekha*

Afterword 171
*Murali Balaji and Ajay Nair*

Index 177

About the Contributors 187

# Introduction

*Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji*

South Asian Americans are making waves in the American landscape beyond science, technology, and business. Jhumpa Lahiri won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Kal Penn and Senthil Ramamurthy have become household names as movie and television stars. MTV—cognizant of Desi[1] spending power—even launched the MTV Desi network, a spin-off from MTV targeting second-generation South Asian Americans. Nationwide, 87.5 percent of Indian Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four have graduated at least from high school. Of the 16,873 U.S.-born Indian Americans, approximately 65 percent have received a college education. Asian Indians have the highest median family income in the United States.[2]

Many first-generation South Asian American immigrants are truly midnight's children, idealists who were born in the aftermath of the independence movement of India.[3] Moreover, many of these immigrants did not feel the overt racism that was pervasive throughout the United States prior to their arrival. In our desire for class mobility, some of us "sold out," enfeebling the powerful history of solidarity between Desis and Africans. Being a "model minority" was something to aspire to for some of us, and in that sense "we are pledged and sometimes in act of bad faith, pledge ourselves, as a weapon against Black folk."[4]

But as second-generation Desis came of age, a few of us chose another route, trying to find out who we were as people of South Asian American descent while fighting the dictum of assimilation and sublimation. For us, hip-hop and the struggle of Blacks against injustice was a rallying cry for action. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five did young Desis a huge service in

putting out "The Message." Many of us were on the edge, but we had to grin and bear it. We didn't feel comfortable in shouting out at the injustice the way that African Americans and Latinos had for decades. But "The Message" was universal in its appeal, forcing us to confront our own rage as part of the disenfranchised subaltern.

Hip-hop has been one of the most influential artistic movements, cultivating anti-establishment thought and establishing identity for millions of disenfranchised and disaffected people around the world. This same genre has been equally profound in its impact on South Asian Americans, compelling many South Asian Americans into activism. We weren't all the children of doctors and engineers. Whether we grew up in minority neighborhoods or not, or had previously experienced the type of overt racism that is an everyday struggle for many Black and Brown people, the anti-establishment tones of hip-hop opened our eyes. Some of us woke up to nightmares of having our parents work two jobs, living in the crowded slums of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. At the same time, some more privileged Desi youth recognized what Jeff Chang calls "differential disempowerment."[5] Ultimately, the idea that White people were going to treat us fairly because we were "model minorities" became as much of a myth as the premise of Dinesh D'Souza's book *The End of Racism.* We knew racism was alive and well, but we still did not have the voice to articulate our outrage. Desi youth realized that coalitions could be built and new spaces could emerge by examining the power imbalances and intersectionalities of disempowerment among different racial groups. Hip-hop provided a vehicle for many to build these bridges.

In the late 1980s, Public Enemy, KRS-1, N.W.A., and Eric B. and Rakim expounded what we first heard in "The Message." Specifically, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" was as much of a rallying call to disaffected Desis as "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party)" was to rebellious rich suburban kids. We got more into the hip-hop scene, following the precedent of the Desi community in London and Toronto. Hip-hop gave us a voice and, more importantly, a sense that it was okay to be Brown and different.

Hip-hop became the voice of change for those of us who preferred to wear the Karl Kani jeans and basketball jerseys over the clothes of conformity our parents would buy us, which emphasized the performative and aesthetic nature of hip-hop identity. Some of us began to exchange our tennis shoes for Nike Air Jordans or the Timberland boots that rappers began to rock in the early 1990s. Though we couldn't ever claim ownership of hip-hop culture, it made us feel like we belonged, and helped us identify across socioeconomic and cultural lines. We were emboldened to speak out in class, not smile and take it when someone made a racist remark, and, more importantly, branch

out and do other things than what our parents wanted. Hip-hop was the language for those of us who rebelled against both the expectations of Anglo society and of our South Asian parents.

Through this genre, we were able to carve out our own identity that allowed us to exist—quite vocally—in the expansive gray area between Black and White. In the early 1990s, Apache Indian burst onto the UK music scene, and his rhymes were able to get across the Atlantic to those of us starving for our own Nas or LL Cool J. All of a sudden, we didn't feel like we were "copping" Black culture. We found a way to make hip-hop our own form of expression, unique to our experiences as Desis. We had "No Reservations" about speaking up and speaking out, and we did it by combining our South Asian heritage into our lyrics and our activism.

Today, hip-hop and its message of perseverance in the struggle have become a way of life for an increasing number of us. Some Desis have become hip-hop artists or spoken-word poets, while others have joined in grassroots organizing, a calling influenced by the impact of the music we listened to growing up. Many Desi youth have recognized that our freedom is inextricably intertwined with challenging culture as a static field and committing model-minority myth suicide.

## Brown Liberation

Over the past decade, South Asian Americans have become more prominent in hip-hop culture, a reflection of the second generation's desire to branch out in more ways of articulating its identity. For years, the dominant discourse on South Asian Americans was shaped by the notion that we were content with being a model minority. But the desire of our parents and grandparents to somehow put aside the racial slights and the cultural Othering was not something that we—some second-generation South Asian Americans—chose to accept. Instead, for some of us, hip-hop culture became a means of cultural expression and, in the process, invoked tensions about identity, the meaning of community, and the concept of authenticity.

We offer this collection of essays from scholars, artists, and activists who hope to reshape our community consciousness. We hope to share the untold stories of Desis who pledge allegiance to a new moral vision—a moral vision that is reminiscent of the Asian-American movement of the late 1960s. The birth of that movement coincided with the Black-liberation struggle, a period of heightened turbulence. Like the activists of the Asian-American movement, the artists featured in this volume are not solely consumed with "asserting racial pride but intent on reclaiming a tradition of militant struggle by earlier

generations. . . . The main thrust was not one of seeking legitimacy and representation within American society but the larger goal of liberation."[6]

The complexities of racialization in the United States are at the forefront of this anthology. Among South Asians, issues of cultural appropriation have been particularly personal. Our subcontinental music has been sampled heavily in American music, while our identities have been caricatured and exoticized in many aspects of American popular culture. We also have no doubt that anti-Black racism exists in Asian America and that hip-hop has been used by Asian Americans and others to "assert dominance over Black bodies."[7] The tensions between South Asian Americans and African Americans have created many important discourses about race, space, and performance. However, as this anthology intends to show, there is a complex relationship between identity and cultural performance.

Hip-hop's importance to South Asian Americans as a musical form, cultural performance, and political statement has never been fully articulated, nor has it been wholly appreciated in its impact on shaping our collective identity. Desi hip-hop artists and their music are an important but often ignored part of the South Asian American community, one that is as diverse and as heterogeneous as the subcontinent that they, their parents, and grandparents come from. Some are quick to dismiss these artists as inauthentic Desis. The young Desis who consume hip-hop culture are also viewed as somehow deficient in "Desiness," that they must be going through a phase and unaware of their roles in the larger political, social, and cultural landscape. However, as Jeff Chang says, hip-hop includes "anyone who is down."[8] Being "down" for Desis should mean questioning if our mobility comes on the backs of Black bodies. Being "down" for Desis should mean leaving no one behind.

## Polycultural Power

This volume of essays from academics, artists, and activists illustrates the complexity of identity, as well as the conflicts that arise when our conceptions of Desiness clash or collaborate with the distinctiveness of hip-hop as a culture and commodity. Whether it's the implicit homophobia of South-Asian culture combining with the blatant homophobia of hip-hop oppressing a young gay Desi hip-hop activist or the angry introspection of a Desi emcee raised as an outsider, we tackle the complexities of cultures that go beyond skin color and musical genre.

The first chapter is written fittingly by Desi polyculturalist Vijay Prashad, whose illuminating and provocative essay shows how hip-hop and cultural performance can be used as a means of resisting the categorization that takes

place—implicitly and explicitly—in White patriarchal society. Prashad discusses the political economy of identity, including how young people in the United States mobilize and identify racially through hip-hop. Using hip-hop and polyculturalism as his framework, Prashad examines issues of culture, diversity, and antiracism.

In chapter 2, cultural-studies scholar Nitasha Sharma expounds on Prashad's notion of polyculturalism, arguing that Desi hip-hop artisits produce "different kinds of hip-hop that target particular audiences" and "that these artists complement one another in bringing more attention to the polyvalent perspectives of Desis claiming space in the public arena."

In chapter 3, Ajay Nair then sketches the relationship of hip-hop to the activism among Desis, particularly when it comes to antiracism efforts as part of a larger effort to resist dominant White ideologies.

In the next chapter, Sunaina Maira's "B-Boys and Bass Girls: Sex, Style, and Mobility in Indian American Youth Culture" examines a broader second-generation subculture centered on music and dance. Maira explores "the sampling of hip-hop by Indian-American youth and the implications that this remix youth culture has for their social relationships with Black youth and their political understandings of race."

The idea of "home" resonates in chapter 5, where writer Deepti Hajela discusses how hip-hop helped her relate more clearly to her Desi identity, despite the backlash she received from some of her South-Asian peers. Hajela's eloquent and introspective essay touches on the ideas of gender, appropriation, and interracial relations while interrogating the racism of the South Asian American community.

In chapter 6, documentary filmmaker Raeshem Nijhon reflects on her experience in creating the documentary *Making Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*. From the world of underground hip-hop, Nijhon profiles several South Asian American hip-hop artists who are making their mark on the hip-hop generation. She concludes that "hip-hop has proved its capability to empower men and empower women. They have been burdened with pressures to uphold the constructs of the model minority, and hip-hop is one of the tools being used to smash these constructs and redefine their reach." Nijhon's intelligent behind-the-scenes look at South Asian American hip-hop artists reveals that they are at "the forefront of a much larger movement to create presence and visibility for South Asian Americans in all arenas."

Murali Balaji ends the first part of the volume with an essay on his own experiences in hip-hop and how the increasingly commodified product that rap has become has alienated him from a culture that helped shape his identity.

Part two of the volume begins with spoken-word lyrics from Swapnil Shah of Karmacy. He sets the tone for the essays that follow from artists who challenge

and reconstitute the narrow boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class in South Asian America.

In chapter 9, MC Chee Malabar explores how his feeling of alienation as an immigrant youth led to his discovery of hip-hop. Malabar details how he evolved from a disgruntled teen in the Bay Area following the L.A. Riots into a socially conscious performer whose rhymes now speak to political action in a post–9/11 society. Unlike many non-Black memcees who preface their connection to hip-hop with a disclaimer of nonownership, Malabar makes it clear that he owns his style. He negotiates the tightrope of race consciousness and musical authenticity by noting: "We approached the music through a critical lens, one that ensured that we stayed true to the sentiment of hip hop music, but we also embraced our Otherness and situated ourselves and reacted through the music as to how we thought we were situated in America, as Asian men, underrepresented and emasculated. The music would be our chance to strike back." Malabar goes on to conclude that hip-hop has evolved into a surrogate culture, one that has allowed him to escape the typecasting of being a South Asian American. "Knowing [hip-hop's] history and life-changing prowess has enabled me to reimagine myself in a way that no other form can. Regardless of the monetary rewards, I can say that it has been a sort of caretaker for me, in ways that my immigrant family, with their background, cannot."

In chapter 10, renowned spoken word artist D'Lo provides a psychosexual look at hip-hop's influence on her identity as a lesbian Sri Lankan American activist and performer, interrogating the paradox of using hip-hop to express her queer lifestyle despite the homophobia of hip-hop culture. D'Lo touches on several key points in her essay, describing how hip-hop has always been a weapon of choice for activists. She expresses dismay over the fact that many prominent hip-hop artists have failed to use their clout to effect social change. D'Lo then discusses her upbringing in an immigrant Hindu home in Lancaster, California, and how hip-hop music began to define her long before she could define herself. She notes that hip-hop became a stronger part of her identity after she embraced her sexuality. Though hip-hop was her calling to activism, D'Lo explains that she must constantly deal with the fact that, as a South Asian lesbian, she is a fringe presence in overall hip-hop culture. She says the struggle will go on but adds that hip-hop will be integral in her redefinition. "As I continue to evolve as an artist, I'm still trying to assemble and dissemble parts of my identity—gay, Sri Lankan American, Hindu, b-girl, hip-hop head, womanist—and merge them into my music. Sometimes, those different parts don't allow for one another, but I'm on a mission to make my unique voice heard."

Chapters 11 and 12 feature essays by the1shanti and Utkarsh Ambudkar, two Desi rappers who made names for themselves by reappropriating ethnic

slurs and using them as markers of their performances. Both artists note how the confrontational nature of freestyle rap—often in front of mostly Black audiences—made them more willing to confront notions of themselves as the Other. As the1shanti writes,

> artists can now make quite a nice living off of making hip-hop music, and the culture has become a standardized vocabulary among youth worldwide. The fresh energy it requires now is less about structure, and more about musicality. It is less about hardship, and more about human experience. It is less about me, the emcee, and more about us, humanity. I feel the responsibility lies upon the shoulders of young artists such as myself—who have had commercial success and continue to release records which appeal universally.

In an interview with coeditor Murali Balaji, international music star DJ Rekha reminisces about her growth during the early days of hip-hop in chapter 13 and talks about what inspired her to fuse hip-hop and bhangra (an Indian music style) into a sociopolitical movement called Basement Bhangra. Rekha takes the reader through twenty years of personal and musical evolution, pointing out how her upbringing in Queens and Long Island made hip-hop as "natural as breathing." But Rekha also notes that the pervasiveness of hip-hop and the dominance of Black culture around her led to a sense of being taken for granted. "Though I really was into hip-hop, it was really interesting to be racially invisible in the environment where I grew up, whereas a lot of my peers in the South Asian community, who grew up in White suburbia, felt like they had to assimilate. In those places, they were really self-hating about being South Asian. On the other hand, I just didn't exist because of my race." That feeling, she says, led her to try other music forms as outlets of self-expression. Ultimately, she says she came back to hip-hop because of its connection to political activism. But Rekha explains that becoming a hip-hop deejay also opened her eyes to the racism within the Desi community and how diverse groups with the same musical interests seemed to segregate themselves in public settings. Rekha says this led her to experiment with hip-hop and bhangra fusion. "My whole vision for Basement was to play Black and Punjabi music because those are the two things I love the most." Rekha also explains why she uses Basement as a pulpit for her political activism. "As for mixing music and politics, I don't think they're separate. I did a lot of community organizing work before I got into Basement. That's just a part of who I am. I don't think it's separated. I think the greatest goal of whatever kind of media is normalizing and legitimizing our existence here. And to me, that's political."

The volume ends with Balaji and Nair discussing the social, political, and cultural aspects and consequences of South Asian American identity performed through hip-hop. The coeditors argue that though media giants such

as Viacom—which owns MTV—have increasingly targeted the South Asian American audience, there are always dangers involved with the commodification of identity. As they note, "the success of the Desi hip-hop scene . . . has pitfalls, many of which are the same as the ones that African American performers experienced (and still do) in the first decade of rap music in the mainstream. Media conglomerates are no longer interested in accurate and dynamic representations of identities but performances that 'sell' ideologies to audiences and audiences to advertisers."

Our collection of essays, playfully titled *Desi Rap*, explores four main ideas: (1) hip-hop as a means of expression of racial identity, class status, gender, sexuality, racism, and culture; (2) the appropriation of Black racial identity by South Asian American consumers of hip-hop; (3) the furthering of the discourse on race and ethnic identity in the United States through hip-hop; and (4) the exploration of South Asian Americans' use of hip-hop as a form of social protest. Ultimately, this volume is about broadening our horizons through hip-hop and embracing our polycultural legacy and future. Desi Rap is a compilation of essays examining the influence of hip-hop on young South Asian Americans, cultivating their perspectives and shaping their life choices, including careers as artists and activists. This collection reveals how hip-hop culture has shaped the South Asian American civil rights struggle that has yet to be told.

## Notes

1. In Hindi Desi means *of/from the country.* In this book, we use the term *Desi* to refer to the idea of a pan–South Asian American community.
2. U.S. Census 2000.
3. Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001, c2000).
4. Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
5. Jeff Chang, "On Ice Cube's 'Black Korea.'" In Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Rajini Srikanth, and Leny M. Strobel (eds.), *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999).
6. Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movement of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s." In Karin Aguilar-San Juan (ed.), *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (Boston: South End Press, 1994).
7. Kenyon Farrow, *We Real Cool? On Hip-Hop, Asian-Americans, Black Folks, and Appropriation.* Available from www.nathanielturner.com/werealcoolkenyon.htm.
8. Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

# PART I

# 1

# My Hip-Hop Life

*Vijay Prashad*

**"There's no role for you."**

I WENT FOR THE AUDITION EXCITED, I left bewildered. It was in my first year of college, and the play was one of those exciting dramas by a contemporary American playwright like Sam Shepard or David Mamet. After many years of doing theater, including some American plays (such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*), I was quite confident that I could get some kind of role, some way to escape into make-believe from the claustrophobic world of Reaganism. The director handed out a few pages from the script and gave us parts. I read as best as I could: understated, disciplined.

Afterward, the director read out a list of names of those whom he wanted to see again, a few days later. I was not on the list. Hanging around the back of the room, perhaps with a gloomy or surly look on my face, I attracted his attention. He came to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You were terrific. You read really well and brought the character to life. But, in this play, there's no role for you."

It took me a long while to digest what he meant.

Meanwhile, in the same theater department, one of the faculty members regularly produced Kabuki plays in yellowface.

That same year, Peter Brook directed Jean-Claude Carriére's version of *The Mahabharata*. Brook used a multi-ethnic cast for this sprawling play, taking a play out of its provenance and showcasing its universal aspects.

Japanese theater and Indian theater can be done by others, but Americans plays by Mamet and Shepard would cease to be authentic if sullied by an Indian accent.

Being in college during the time of multiculturalism's institutionalization was remarkable. For one, the administration at my college (as elsewhere) moved some money toward the diversification of the curriculum. We already had faculty on board who could teach African history or Chinese literature, but now they were able to create minors and even majors, to secure funds for programming, and to give greater profile to the study of elsewhere places. The college also provided funds for students to create cultural organizations, to gather together to socialize among ourselves, and to conduct cultural shows for the campus. These were early days for the cultural organizations.

One of the tricks of college multiculturalism was that it gave us students of color a sense that our histories belonged to this intellectual world, indeed that we should walk with pride across campus. But multiculturalism didn't touch the overwhelming power of what I tend to call "White supremacy from above," which was lodged in the bricks and mortar of our beautiful campus. I don't mean the men in white hoods, who laid terror across the country decades earlier (that's "White supremacy from below"). I mean the comfortable assumption of multiculturalism that our histories belong but do not in any way come close to the untouched (and generally unspoken) superiority of the cultures of Europe (and European culture in the United States). The world of multiculturalism welcomes the cultures of the other lands (Africa, Asia, Latin America) and puts them on display. But it is unwilling to allow this new cultural recognition to disrupt the contented place of European culture at the top of an unspoken hierarchy. Teach the *Bhagavada-Gita* and the history of Asante Kingdom, but, *come on*, it is not of the same caliber as, say, the Bible and the history of the British Empire. Include the "non-Western," but always as subordinate even as we are too polite to actually make such a statement in public.

It's okay to have plays from and about the other lands on our college campuses, but it is not proper to have an Indian play a Texan in a Sam Shepard play. That's just a small, even inconsequential, part of a wider problem.

What allows European civilization to remain untouched by foreign hands, despite the long history of interaction and borrowing, is the tendency to divide the world into separate civilizations, to make the claim that these civilizations have their own logic and that they are insulated from each other. These unitary civilizations are all then provided with a dominant logic, with the contradictory traditions erased or at least seen as trivial to the point of being irrelevant. These isolated cultures, in turn, are seen to play an overwhelming role in the lives of the individuals who are affiliated with them. For example, Indian civilization is seen as singular, governed by particular social rules (such as caste) that are timeless and immutable. If individuals or groups disagree with these rules, a claim is made that they are no longer of that civi-

lization but now have been, say, "Westernized." The civilization's culture remains stable, and the actions of individuals and groups are treated as variances from the norm.

The norm that appeals to the guardians of multiculturalism is often a collection of the most orthodox cultural elements within a social space. Indian culture, for instance, is typically identified as a sort of Hindu culture, and it is the male orthodoxy that is given license to speak for the culture's norms. The choice of who is selected to speak for the norm is fraught, and it is often those who had been chosen in colonial days to be the native informant-collaborators, or else those who are today in positions of social power in what counts as the civilization.

Much of what I've written above is in passive voice. In a crafty opening to his 1984 *La Racisme*, Albert Memmi describes racism as a "tragic enigma" and says, "No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still, racism persists, real and tenacious." As I lay out the inner logic of multiculturalism, much the same sort of sensation occurs to me. Hidden in the core of the idea are its pernicious implications, although on the surface much of it seems bland and inoffensive. Perhaps that is why I have often felt that the new multiracism functions in passive voice, all the more to drive its victims crazy!

I guess when I say that multiculturalism has its tricks, one of them is the ability to mask the maintenance of both cultural and social hierarchy while allowing in a selection of cultural forms and its chosen people. The campus's overall hierarchical culture remains. Upward mobility is the order of the day: one has to be proud if one's own is now a corporate CEO or a military general. I suppose it was with a combination of self-righteousness and bitterness that I copied down a line from Gandhi in one of my college notebooks: "The test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns but the absence of starvation among its masses" (Muir Central College Economics Society, Allahabad, December 22, 1916). I suppose also that that was why I spent more of my free time (and there was not much of that) organizing my peers against the college's investments in apartheid South Africa and volunteering at a local church basement to give a hand to the newly arrived Salvadorian political refugees. It turned out that the bulk of the Students Against Apartheid were either Indians or Mexican Americans. At our events we played the soundtrack from *Pukar* and *Coolie* and ate tacos, while talking about how to get our college to disinvest (we won). These were incidental episodes, unable to overwhelm the culture of hierarchy that governed the campus. Campus politics, in our small way, might have tried to incubate a culture of solidarity, although to be fair we mostly let our marginality get in our way and ended up with self-righteousness.

## Hip-Hop's Epistemology

Rejected by the stage, I went down into the basement of the music department's building to the college radio station. One of the great charms of college radio is that any student can get on the air, particularly if you're crazy enough to pick the midnight to dawn shift. That's what I got, initially cohosted with a Seattle punk rocker, and then eventually on my own, playing English punk and postpunk. I was drawn to the art-rock sounds of Roxy Music and to Brian Eno. The technological sounds immersed me, drew me into an antisocial space where social history dissolved into machines. Eno's irreverence for authorship impressed me. Eno contributed from behind the soundboard, electronically messing with whatever sounds his band would send his way, and introducing taped noises around the rhythm. From Eno, I learned of Lee "Scratch" Perry, the founder of dub music. Perry produced some of the leading Reggae music of the 1970s, including Bob Marley and the Wailers after the death of their producer Leslie Kong. Perry's own work at his Black Ark studio was of another order than anything he produced for others. Whether its *Kung Fu Meets the Dragon* (1975) or *Super Ape* (1976) or *Revolution Dub* (1976) or the classic *Roast Fish, Collie Weed & Corn Bread* (1978), the sound of "Scratch" Perry is unique. Perry creates sonic visions, little nuggets that emanate from a combination of musical instruments (horns and guitars) and "found sounds." Both Eno and Perry fashion a world that is not so much postrace as chaotically human, as drawing voraciously from all the world's cultures (especially pop-cultures) and making them into art via soundboards. It was heavy stuff, even for the 2 A.M. crowd.

Years later, when I read Jeff Chang's history of hip-hop, I learned that Perry played a central role in the technological and sonic world of the new aesthetics of the streets. The soundboards that came to the Bronx from Jamaica bore the marks of the Black Ark, and the ravenous attitude to cultural forms and resources provided the stance of much of what would become hip-hop. In the 1980s, as multiculturalism made its appearance on our college campuses, hip-hop tore through the streets and housing projects. Hip-hop, the culture not simply the music, threw out a different epistemology from multiculturalism. It did not believe that cultures are spatially sealed, or rather it could not believe this. In the congested multiethnic working-class areas, with migrants cheek by jowl with other residents, cultural purity was a conceit not a reality. Artists borrowed liberally from resources around them. In music this was to sample, but the same could be said about fashion and indeed hip-hop aesthetics in general. The most encouraging thing about the hip-hop aesthetic is the idea that even if everything has been done before, it can yet be transformed. The essence of hip-hop rejected private property and embraced

artistry and craft. Cultural forms exist not to be owned but to be borrowed, to be experimented with, to be improved upon and thrown down in the next cipher. The afrofuturism of Perry and Rap's youthful pleasure of cultural salvage disallowed cynicism. Hip-hop looked backward and sideways for resources, but only if it would allow for forward motion.

When Chuck D called hip-hop the Black CNN, he had a point. It was hip-hop that told the truth about the shift in the state's relationship with the multi-ethnic poor. Deterioration of social services and an increase in state repression characterized the post-Nixon United States The Civil Rights movement's victories allowed non-White Americans to claim a portion of public goods. But, as this victory sank in, globalization led to the withdrawal of the delivery of public goods via the state and the privatization of state functions. Access, won with such pain, was denied. Hip-hop recognized this, whether in the lyrics of the music that showed us how police repression intensified or among the graffiti artists whose public art directly confronted the disappearance of public space (much the same could be said of the block-party producers, who valiantly tried to open up community space for young people).

Hip-hop emerges in the streets of the deindustrialized cities, where blue-collar jobs morphed into low-end service-sector jobs, and where social services once promised vanished. Capital fled the ghetto: industrial investment dried up with globalization (and the factories remained as abandoned mausoleums); retail investment rushed to the suburbs leaving space for the small family shops (*bodegas*), whose economic survival is premised upon the sale of liquor, the lottery, and the prevention of petty theft. Humans abhor a social vacuum, and into this wasteland came the "off the books" entrepreneurs and the drug-profit fueled gangs. The gangs, led and staffed mainly by young men, displaced the elders and negotiated space for their activities with the police. Hip-hop was deeply affected by the *faux* upward mobility of the drug economy and by the military hierarchy of the gangs. The misogyny and greed that entered the cultural world was not accidental or latent, but it was the cultural ancillary of the social life of deindustrialization and gangland. Hip-hop first fully came to terms with the changes in the political economy of the ghetto and in the nature of the state. The immediate and sharp critique of police brutality comes through in some of the earliest songs and graffiti. But the critique was not developed further in the aesthetic domain, or else it was derailed by the social conditions of gangsterism. The politics of refusal (*fuck the police*) could not develop into the politics of transformation.

In May 1995, Officer Robert Allen of the Hartford Police Department shot and killed Acquan Salmon, a thirteen-year-old boy. Afraid for his life, perhaps, Salmon fled the scene of a bungled burglary, had his hands in the air as he ran,

and was shot in the back by Officer Allen. The bullet pierced Salmon's lung, and he died. The young boy had grown up around the streets of a neighborhood trashed by capital flight and White flight, as well as by the infestation of the drug economy. His younger brother took refuge and employment in the gangs. The elder, afraid for his brother, tried to force him off the streets, but the younger intuitively knew that his streets were paved with cocaine money, not gold. He followed. One day his brother beat him for going out at night, and the bruises of that beating forced the younger boy's teacher to call the Department of Children and Families. Salmon was removed to a foster home, a few blocks down the road. Now without the vigilance of his older brother, the younger was back on the streets, trying to burgle someone who had driven to the crack house to score some blow. A few days later, at the protest over his killing, the local preachers began to lead a misplaced chant, "Where were the parents?" An older woman, Emma Fair, a leader in the North Main Club of the Communist Party, cut them off with "It's the system," a line taken up by the hip-hoppers of the Young Communist League, one of them Fair's granddaughter. They understood Emma Fair's intervention. Method Man's *don't blame me*, *blame society*, is right on, but then, after one establishes culpability, what does one do? Emma Fair and the YCL quite rightly point to the vulgarity of police brutality. But what can hip-hop tell us beyond that?

If we widen hip-hop beyond the main aesthetic elements and include the politics we'd get a richer image of the Hartford intervention as well as of hip-hop's potential. Young people of the hip-hop generation and veterans of older struggles run community organizations from Providence to the Bay, from Miami to Chicago. Groups like the South-West Youth Collaborative, Just Cause, the Ella Baker Center, the Bus Riders Union, the Miami Worker's Center, Make the Road by Walking, and the Third Eye Movement are some of the on-the-ground groups, and the National Hip-Hop Political Convention is a platform for artists and intellectuals to do their bit alongside and on the ground. Against Gangsta' Rap, the embodiment of the gang view, and close to the political world of the strugglers, came what was to be called *conscious hip-hop*, and it is here, in alliance with the strugglers, that the full liberatory potential of hip-hop could be realized. This is the onrush of Raptivism, hip-hop for social justice (as Boots Riley of The Coup labels it).

The aesthetics of hip-hop, not only in its conscious guise but also in the substance of its gang-land cousin, provided for me the foundation to think again and in depth about issues of culture, diversity, and antiracism. Out of some of its elementary principles I began to write about the concept of *polyculturalism.* Here's a brief introduction to some of polyculturalism's principles, which I take to be the basic *stance* of hip-hop in general:

1. Culture is not simply what is out there, what we live in, and what lives through us (where we sleep, what we eat, how we talk, who we have sex with, what dreams we have, and on). Equally important as what we do is how we understand "culture": different people within a cultural world have competing ideas of what their culture should include. Culture, then, is a political domain, not simply anthropological.
2. If this is the case, we need to be alert to the relationship between power and culture, how the dreams of the powerful often enforce the starvation of others. Stereotypes are not empty but full of laden power, able to shape public policy and have enormous consequences. It is not just prejudice as a personal affliction but the systematic use of these prejudices against entire populations. The concept of the "welfare queen," for instance, enabled the disenfranchisement of large numbers of people from economic assistance. We have to carefully see who, in which context, gets to define what is culture, what is beauty, what is a livelihood. This is the culture of political economy.
3. If certain people are able to leverage their political power to define what counts in a culture, then we have to tend to *how* this happens, not just *that* it happens. Starvation and a lack of political power have the capacity to constrain dreams. The freedom to imagine is cultivated by security of livelihood. This is the political economy of culture.
4. It is important to tend to the relationship between power and culture only if we believe that there is no singular, noncontradictory concept of culture that applies in the world. If we see culture as an arena of conflict, then it is imperative to provide a sense of how culture is both alive and vibrant, a place of contest. In that case, we have to show how cultures are neither spatially nor temporally sealed—namely. . . .
5. Cultures are not spatially sealed. Cultural worlds are created in relationship with other cultural worlds. They interact; they are alive. There are no boundaries, only centers. As Eric B and Rakim put it, "It ain't where you're from. It's where you're at. . . . Even the ghetto" (*Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*, 1990).
6. Cultures are not temporally sealed. Cultural worlds expand, contract, grow, and desiccate. They are not formed once, in an ancient past, and then carried forward out of time, as an essence, as what is authentic about people. Culture is what we live in, what we fight over. It is alive, and, therefore, it changes. Cultures are living resources, not dead heritages.

Polyculturalism is a repudiation of both multiculturalism, and its setting: color-blind racism. Polyculturalists believe that all cultures are interrelated,

that they draw from each other. We believe that before we get too comfortable in our cultural resources we need to take the axe of antiracism to the stout tree of White supremacy. In our defiant skins, alert, we take on the racism of our times.

## Desis Like That

My phone rang. It had been a busy morning. We had a press conference the previous afternoon that got us some attention in the papers and on the evening news. Our campaign to remove tobacco and liquor advertising from the neighborhoods of south Providence had gained some traction among the residents and now with the media. But this call was different. There was a young woman on the line, a student from Brown University. She had seen the broadcast and was interested in my presence in the south side, working alongside Dominicans, Blacks, Whites, Hmongs, and other peoples. Her name was Pooja, and she was a member of the South Asian Student's Association (SASA). The group wanted to know how they, as South Asians, could do their bit. I invited them down to the office of Direct Action for Rights and Equality, where I worked.

A few days later they arrived. I was immediately impressed by their sense that something was not right in the world. Raised in affluent, de facto segregated enclaves of suburban America, these young people knew that their own upward mobility was morally insufficient. They wanted elsewhere. I introduced them to some of the young people in our office, remarkable Sabrina, for instance, who was then a high school student in the local public school and who ran the $E=MC^2$ campaign (Education = Multicultural Curriculum). The SASA group promised to lead a session on college entry for the high school kids. If the high school students didn't get as much as I had thought out of the interaction, the real winner was me. These students drove right into me, showing me a new dynamic in our community that I had seen before only in glimpses.

When migrants from India, such as my family, came to the United States after 1965, few had any sense of themselves as victims of racism. They had been born into a country already free from the racist colonial state, and they were raised into middle-class families with caste profiles that allowed them to easily enter college and to feel like their merit (from the years of state-sponsored technical training) was a sufficient passport for the new world. When they came into the United States, it was after the Civil Rights Act afforded them rights to equality, and their technical training moved them into zones where they were able to do well at what they excelled at. Largely fleeting

meetings with others like them fulfilled their social lives, and their association of themselves was always with their homeland, even as they recognized that they would perhaps never go back there to live. They were Indians in America who would become Indian Americans later, only because this latter name was part of the culture of assimilation into being a migrant American. I knew these migrants because I was one of them.

I saw children of these migrants, but not in college. When I was in college, there were some other Indians, but we were mainly those who had spent most of our educational lives in India and only come to the United States in our high school or college years. To be made into a "race" is something rather different for the migrant (who comes with memories and feelings of a different socialization) than for the "children of '65" (who are raised in a context where their dignity is always in doubt). With "race" as the dominant framework in the lives of the youth, their consciousness and activities would certainly be of a different order than that of their parents or of those who came on different routes to the United States. I remember the children of my relatives, those whom I had to keep an eye on as the adults sat in the living room or the kitchen, reveling in each other's presence. For the kids, these were their "home friends," with their "school friends" being mainly White kids or others, but rarely any of these Indian kids. I didn't see them for what they would become as they wound their way through the holding camps of junior high and into the racial space of college. I would meet them later, in those Brown University students.

The notion of South Asian American emerged before these "children of '65" flooded the colleges and created their organizations. The lead came from women's organizations, gay and lesbian groups, and antiracist civil-rights formations. Women's groups, as Sharmila Rudrappa and K. E. Supriya point out, pioneered the way. Some of the initial groups include: Sneha, a network for women of South Asian origin (1983), Manavi (1985), Apna Ghar (1989), and Sakhi for South Asian Women (1989). The impulse for the choice of the new name was not singular: first, given the lack of resources, there was a pragmatic need to offer services to women from as large a region as possible, and, given the historical links between Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, it was logical to reach out to women from these places; second, the defense of violence against women was often made in a national register, with claims made for the normalness of cultural patriarchy in this or that zone, so that the unity was itself a repudiation of the national ownership of the rights or duties of women; third, and in relation to the second point, the unity disavowed the multiracist belief that each people must have their own logic for how to run their families and homes ("cultural defense"); fourth, the unity also celebrated the subjugated traditions and resources that united people across national

lines in the diaspora and also gave us strength in our fights against both the dominant elements in our community and multiracism.

Alongside the women's organizations, on the same axis, came the gay and lesbian, later *queer*, groups. A pioneer here was Trikone, founded in San Francisco in 1986, which was followed soon thereafter by the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association and others. Finally, as racist assaults struck the population, there was a turn to create pan–South Asian civil-rights organizations to address this, notably after the late 1980s Dotbuster incidents. The initial reaction to the Dotbusters violence came from a range of people, most of whom were shocked by the beating of Dr. Kaushal Sharan and the murder of Navroze Mody. In time, this violence matured into attacks on Indian American businesses, who then organized themselves into groups such as the Indian Business Association (on the initiative of Pradip "Peter" Kothari). By the mid-1990s, a new set of organizations, led by South Asian American college graduates, flooded the civil-rights landscape—culminating in the creation of the South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow. As more and more Indian migrants entered working-class jobs, groups emerged on the South Asian American axis to fight for the their rights. Worker's Awaaz broke off from Sakhi to become a base to organize domestic workers, as the Lease Drivers Coalition (later the New York Taxi Worker's Alliance) broke from the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence to organize taxi workers (all this is detailed in books by Monisha Das Gupta and Biju Mathew). These sorts of groups, including the South Asian Workers Project, would adopt the pan–South Asian platform as a pragmatic gesture and as a critique of the national divides that do no good for those in working-class jobs.

As Yen Le Espiritu put it in 1992, "panethnic groups are products of political and social processes, rather than cultural bonds." They emerge to "contest systems of racism and inequality in American society," this in contrast to "ethnic particularism or assimilation." The idea of the South Asian American emerges in these social and political, but also cultural, spaces.

But the women's groups, the gay and lesbian organizations, and the antiracist groups do not alone account for the emergence of the idea of South Asian American. When the children of the post-1965 migration came to college, they became "South Asian American" on campus. The "children of '65" were not averse to this label, since few of them are invested in the regional and state nationalism of their parents. Even here, though, the term continues to be used with some tension and unease, mainly because it seeks to constitute an as yet amorphous social formation. Our major cultural institutions, notably colleges, are highly racialized institutions, where racial distinction is the means for the students to undergo segmentary assimilation or a "second migration" into their essential ethnicity. Bandana Purkayastha and Sunaina

Maira have painted a rich portrait of how this racialization operates. Maira tells us that this segmentation into South Asian American organizations "often is a response to the partitioning of ethnic identity politics in academic institutions, where ethnicity and geography are the accepted boundaries of student organizations, academic study, and institutional funding." The geography of South Asia is irrelevant here, for what is alone of importance is the serial naming of minorities as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, East Asian Americans, South Asian Americans, and what not. The sociopolitical map of the United States moves the "children of '65" to take shelter in the category "South Asian American."

Even as *South Asian American* emerges as a consequence of racialism, there is no guarantee that the term itself will provoke a progressive agenda. In the segmented world of multiculturalism, ethnicity can function as the clothes for social mobility. The skills learned in a college SASA could easily train one for corporate mobility and lead one directly into its postgraduate version, NETSAP, the Network of South Asian Professionals. In her sharp assessment of Asian American life in 1993, Karin Aguilar-San Juan pointed out that many young Asian Americans affiliate with the concept of "people of color" because they feel marginalized by U.S. society, in whose terms they might ultimately still want to succeed. Their analysis would not include racism or how poverty is reproduced. "As a result," she writes, "many of these young people define their political activism solely in terms of asserting their identity and are driven to accept essentialist notions of race and ethnicity." Much the same applies to South Asian Americans, many of whom might seek refuge in their ethnicity not so much as a platform for social change as a way of recovering dignity, and perhaps of distinguishing themselves from other minorities.

The students from Brown's SASA ran the spectrum. Some went on to corporate careers and became leading lights in the NETSAP world (one, who graduated a few years before is now the governor of Louisiana). Others went to professional school and yet pushed their ethics to the max (through founding groups like the South Asian Public Health Associates and South Asians for Choice). A few others went a little further down the road of Raptivism, getting involved in the major social-justice fights of our time through becoming professional organizers, civil-rights lawyers, or else energetic participants in the movement when they were off work. There are few social-justice organizations in the United States at this time that don't have at least one South Asian American on the staff.

And a few even went into what we so carefully call "the arts." Raised in families of highly trained technical and professional workers who have high aspirations for upward mobility through these professional channels (largely because they are high income earners and do not come from wealth themselves),

the "children of '65" were under intense pressure to go into the paraprofessional fields. Those who bucked the pressure, against high emotional odds, were already offering a sotto voce critique of the model-minority stereotype. Those who adopted the cultural frameworks that seemed to emanate from Black America were even more radical in their disavowal of the upward-mobility multiculturalism of our times. Their *choice* of a career or a vocation is already political, so it was only natural that those Desis who entered the world of hip-hop would walk into its conscious community (this is so for Chee Malabar to D'Lo, from Outernational to Jugular). Many of these artists populate this book.

## Readin' the Signs

One of the challenges of hip-hop's art forms has been to stave off the toxic onrush of commodification. That phrase "keepin' it real" is a testimony to the anxiety over how the music industry siphons talent to create money. If most elements of hip-hop are susceptible to corporate takeover, the domain of antisystemic politics is less vulnerable. As William Upski Wimsatt put it, "Young people are noticing that the only thing that can't be bought and sold, coopted or marketed, anymore is substantive political organizing and dissent." Fierce and committed, this set of Raptivists is engaged for the long haul. We're on the move, alert; like Talib Kweli, we "stay readin' the signs."

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# 2

# Polyvalent Voices: Ethnic and Racialized Desi Hip-Hop

*Nitasha Tamar Sharma*

### Play

TWO SLIGHTLY INEBRIATED TWENTY-SOMETHING-YEAR-OLD Desi men had their arms lazily draped around one another's shoulders. They were belting out the Gujarati and English chorus of "Blood Brothers," in time with Nimo and Swap, the two performers on stage.

> Maru dhil, my heart, maru loi, my blood from the start,
> Mari nath, my family two worlds apart,
> How do I move on bhai,
> Kevirithe jais, cuz no matter where I go,
> My soul is in the same place!

I could not help smiling at these two "brothers" who stood on one side of the packed dance floor of downtown Manhattan's Knitting Factory where Karmacy, a Los Angeles–based four-man hip-hop group, was performing one summer night in 2006. The sentiments of fraternal connection and displacement in the bilingual rap performed by two of Karmacy's four Indian emcees—Nimo, Swap, KB, and Sammy—seemed to have hit the right ethnic spot at that moment with this crowd of about two hundred, mostly Desi twenty- and thirty-year olds. It is true that the suspiciously red shots of alcohol downed by a group of four girls in front of me could have aided the enthusiasm, including their persistent screams of, "We Love You, SanDEEEEEEEEP," a newly signed R&B member of Rukus Avenue Records who

preceded the headliner. However, by all estimations it was the series of acts, stage production, and the energy and content of the headlining group, Karmacy, that fueled the audience's engagement with the artists. The result was a comforting and celebratory sense of *being* Desi in a Desi space that night.

The production and consumption of a panethnic and shared South Asian American identity in nightclubs is powerful for the sons and daughters of new immigrants who have few public places to claim as their own in their birth or adopted country. Through performances like this one at the Knitting Factory, Karmacy has been able to turn nightclubs and concert halls into places of ethnic expression. Brown audiences turn dance floors into Desi spaces, reveling in having majority status for a night as they pulse along with songs produced by, for, and about South Asians in America. This transformation comes about when Desi audiences like and listen to Desi hip-hop that incorporates South Asian instruments, languages, and themes produced and performed by fellow South Asian Americans. This is what I refer to as *ethnic hip-hop.*

On a different night in downtown Manhattan, I met up with a longtime friend and research participant, Chirag, a.k.a. MC Chee Malabar, so we could catch up and vibe to some music. Cold Duck Complex, my partner's hip-hop-jazz band, had just performed that evening and this presented a good opportunity for me to introduce Chee to the band's bass player, Joe, a fellow Indian hip-hop musician. Makaya (my partner), Joe, and I later met up with Chee at a SoHo hip-hop club, packed to the walls with fine men and fly women flirting in anticipation of what the end of the night might hold in store for them. Our crew was more immediately concerned with procuring Coronas and whiskeys and staking out a spot somewhere near the bar where we could talk. Dodging elbows, Chee and I caught up on our lives since we had last spoken—how his new solo album, *Oblique Brown*, was shaping up, whether or not he liked the MFA program at Brooklyn College, and how my own research and life were going. The conversation moved on to a favorite of ours: evaluating the latest Jay-Z album.

In contrast to my "Desi-fied" experience at the Knitting Factory, here we were, two Desis (Joe, whose family is from Tanzania, and Chee, who hails from Baroda in India with roots in Djibouti, Africa), one mixed Desi/White woman (myself), and Makaya, a biracial man of Black and White heritage, claiming a corner in a racially diverse—Black, Asian, White, and Brown—nightclub. The deejay was playing the kind of hip-hop one expects from New York clubs (that is, good). The decibels were loud, and when we were tired of yelling to get heard we paused, nodding our heads to the East Coast beats. Chee Malabar, a "1.5 generation" Desi raised in San Francisco, was, at that time, an emcee in New York, moving there after attending school in Pennsylvania (he has since moved to Los Angeles). He raps in venues that attract hip-hop heads and spo-

ken-word fans, and his rhymes cover a gamut of topics, from police injustice and political corruption to being the baddest emcee. The multiracial social and musical spaces that Chee occupies—from his apartment in Brooklyn to downtown hip-hop clubs and uptown open mics—reflect his engagement with issues affecting multiple racial, political, and geographic communities. When this engagement comes through the content, style, and delivery of his music, it typifies what I term *racialized hip-hop*.[1]

During the course of fieldwork since 1998, I have seen the members of Karmacy perform across the United States just as often as I have met up with Chee Malabar at hip-hop clubs and bars in San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. The ethnic and racial spaces these artists occupy and create mirror the kinds of hip-hop and identities they produce; this, in turn, shapes the makeup of their audiences and their marketing strategies. There is no *one* "Desi hip-hop," nor is there a particular "kind" of South Asian who becomes a hip-hop artist. Rather, Desi hip-hop artists reflect the diversity of South Asia as well as the range of identities available to them in America. This chapter describes two main strands of their hip-hop production—ethnic hip-hop and racialized hip-hop—as examples of some of the new kinds of expressions that are being articulated by Desis in the United States

## Pause: Debating Race, Debating Ethnicity: South Asian/Black Relations

Much of the literature on immigrants, including Asian Americans, among the fastest-growing groups in the United States, tends to focus on their ethnic and cultural identities and is still largely based on assimilation models of upward mobility.[2] This is especially true for Indian Americans who are among the most highly educated and economically successful in the United States, according to the census. Hip-hop scholars, on the other hand, explore issues of authenticity, corporate commodification, and the history and racial politics of Black popular culture.[3] Pulling these fields together offers a race-based theoretical framework for describing how Desi or South Asian American youth use hip-hop to create antiracist models of immigrant identity that may form the basis of cross-racial social movements.

Contemporary scholarship on American diversity in and outside Asian American Studies has rightly emphasized how ethnicity has been preserved, rather than fading, over time.[4] This literature also moves beyond the Black and White model of race relations by revealing how recent immigrant groups adapt to life in the United States while retaining cultural practices. However, these group differences (labeled *diversity*) are seen through a multicultural framework in both K–12 and higher education.[5] While multiculturalism, or

the celebration of cultural practices, is important for advocating ethnicity as a defining aspect of life in America, it has often been understood—especially in school curricula—as a flattening out difference, marking all difference as equal, and ignoring the critical components of history, power, and inequality. Yet difference matters as it implies unequal power relations particularly in the context of "race."

The danger of eliding the relevance of race and existing forms of racism through the employment of an ethnicity-based paradigm is evident in some of the research on the immigration and assimilation of post-1965 Asian and Latino immigrants and their U.S.–born children, including the Desis contributing to this volume. Segmented assimilation, a revamped sociological theory of assimilation, subsumes race under ethnicity and privileges the importance of ethnic networks for determining educational success, thus evaluating their assimilation into American society.[6] This theory predicts that second-generation immigrants who adopt Black culture and affiliate with Blacks are "maladaptive" and represent what they term *downward assimilation.* The assumptions that underlie this racialized theory advocate anti-Black racism by identifying *culture*—pointing to the allegedly deviant culture of the Black urban underclass—as *the* explanation for differential standing in American society.[7] The theory ultimately serves to separate minority groups, much like the model-minority myth that also explains Asian Americans "success" in terms of their cultural and family values. It is also inadequate as an explanation for persistent forms of inequality because it fails to take into account historical factors, such as enslavement and skills-preferences specified in immigration legislation that affected Blacks and Asians, respectively. Finally, such theories downplay institutionalized racism—a theme taken up by Desi emcees in their rhymes.

## Rewind: Why These Desis? Why Hip-Hop?

Research and debates focused on conflicted Asian-Black relations over such issues as affirmative action and Korean-Black tensions impact our conceptions of on-the-ground relations between minority groups.[8] These ideas in combination with other factors lead to some confusion over the idea of South Asian Americans loving hip-hop. This is partially due to the notion that Asians (including South Asians) and Blacks are either distant, with little in common, or else are competing over resources in areas such as education, the work force, and social services.[9] Material relations interact with ideological divisions that pit Asians and Blacks against one another through the legacy of White racism and the constructions of "model" (Asian Americans) and "not-so-model"

(Blacks) minorities. Asians, however, are still distinguished as "minorities" despite such "praise" and their status as citizens. Additionally, from a young age Desi youth contend with the processes of racialization or being imputed with historically contingent and socially constructed notions of difference based on phenotype.[10] Many Desi hip-hop artists recount the racism they faced from White students in grade school while others commented that they long had the feeling that "something just wasn't right" in this nation. That Desis are not White also distinguishes their life experiences and motivations for adopting hip-hop from White hip-hop heads,[11] many of whom may also sincerely embrace hip-hop as a tool to articulate antiracist ideologies.

While Desi hip-hop has only recently attracted the attention of scholars and partygoers alike, it has been a long time in the making. The artists I spoke with, including Chee Malabar and D'Lo who contribute essays to this book, have been involved in various areas of hip-hop production for over a decade and in some cases spanning two decades, from emceeing (or rapping) to deejaying (spinning records) and as music producers, record label owners, journalists, and critics. Understanding their backgrounds helps to explain who becomes an artist and what draws them specifically to hip-hop. While I detail this at length elsewhere,[12] it is relevant to note that hip-hoppers include men and women who come from racially mixed urban areas as well as from predominantly White suburban neighborhoods. The class and racial demographics of the schools they attended and communities where they grew up shaped their introduction to, attraction to, and specific roles in the production of hip-hop. Most of the artists I met lived on the East and West Coasts, although my particular focus was on the Bay Area of Northern California. While some artists work in all-Desi groups (Karmacy, Abstract Vision/Humanity) and others in pan-Asian groups (Himalayan Project), they also collaborate with Whites and Blacks in producing, promoting, and performing their music.

South Asian American hip-hop artists share some of the characteristics and experiences of many Desi youth, particularly as children of immigrants. However, their dedication to music, life choices, and perspectives on race often distinguish them from coethnics. While many Desi youth come to love hip-hop and adopt the popular styles of "urban culture," including brand-name clothing, aesthetics, and slang distributed through BET and on urban radio stations, few decide to genuinely befriend Blacks and understand African American histories; even fewer are dedicated to creating a form of Black popular culture. Given parental pressures to attend college and pursue professional careers, why would some Desis choose to use hip-hop as a way to express themselves? Additionally, why do they feel akin to Blacks in the United States when many Americans emphasize cultural differences?

If we analyze the lives of South Asian American hip-hop artists and place our current knowledge of this cultural formation within its historical context, the connection between South Asians and a politicized cultural product of Black and Puerto Rican urban communities may not seem so far fetched. Desi hip-hop artists who record, have albums for sale, and perform in venues across America (and in some cases internationally) were born in the 1970s and came of age in the 1980s—just as hip-hop was born. Hip-hop in its early stages was neither as easily available nor as widespread or co-opted by commercial interests as it is today. The global trajectory and monetary success of hip-hop industries are remarkable precisely because they have *so quickly* become one of the most dominant popular and musical cultures of all time due to technological advances and the global appeal of the content and form of hip-hop.

In the early 1970s and 1980s when the artists were in their pre- and early-teen years, few hip-hop tracks made it to the airwaves. Young Desis in suburban areas came across this new form of music through first-ever broadcasts on MTV (specifically on Yo! MTV Raps—*if* they had cable) or else though their excavations of local records stores where some young music heads, like DJ Bella from Las Vegas, were already spending some of their time and money. Thus, when these youth were first learning of hip-hop, a number of them were already invested in musical forms, such as ska, punk, and reggae. As the bass line and drum beats of hip-hop hit their ears it was often love at first break, and to some, like Sammy of the hip-hop group Karmacy, it was reminiscent of bhangra. Those from urban neighborhoods were living at the sites where hip-hop was being produced, in high school hallways, street corners, and bedrooms. While Desi artists from suburban areas were drawn to numerous musical genres through music lessons and record collections, these young urban Desis grew up alongside Black and Asian peers, learning to b-boy, rhyme, and freestyle. In fact, a few Desi boys buffed up their rhyme skills in order to either learn English (having migrated from India, like Chee) or used witty verbal abilities to avoid physical interactions with bullies and went on to contribute to the new culture called hip-hop as b-boys, deejays, and rappers. What is it about hip-hop, though, that would draw these individuals to commit resources and time to it, even delaying their professional careers? And why did they choose hip-hop as the way to articulate their identities and concerns?

Hip-hop may be the most popular form of youth culture, achieving great exposure and mass appeal. Even those outside its targeted audiences come into contact with hip-hop through a variety of formats—dance, acoustics, dress, style, and slang—carried along vectors as prevalent as television commercials, radio stations, music television, magazines, parties, clubs, concerts, and major American entertainment and media events. (This may be why my

mother knows how to use "bling bling" correctly in a sentence!) Those less familiar with hip-hop are usually informed about what it "is" (as a substitute for "Black culture" writ large) through the most commercial and highly accessible formats such as music-television stations (BET, VH1, MTV), urban radio, and the occasional news broadcast about the latest fiasco involving a hip-hop icon. This understanding tends to be simplistic and one-dimensional, however, as selected spokespeople, messages, and kinds of hip-hop are promoted and granted exposure by large decision-making media and marketing conglomerates.

In order to access the multiple kinds and formats of hip-hop—from its various genres (conscious rap, Southern bounce, Yay Area hyphy), numerous elements (including expressions of dance), and links to hip-hop activism and spoken word—one has to delve beyond its mainstream and commercialized depictions. Desis in hip-hop tend to be well informed about the history, dynamics, and multiple forms and messages of hip-hop; indeed, their musical careers often depend on this knowledge. In some sense, they are also able to keep up with the evolution of hip-hop because they have come of age along with it (they identify, for instance, with the main characters in the film "Brown Sugar" or Common's song, "I Used to Love H.E.R."), unlike younger fans who see Sean Combs in all his renditions (a.k.a. Puff Daddy, P. Diddy, Diddy) as old school.

A fuller and more historicized comprehension of hip-hop helps to identify and clarify why some Desis and other non-Blacks are so drawn to a predominantly Black cultural form. Hip-hop arose from the urban streets of the South Bronx in New York and swept across the United States to other cities also experiencing deindustrialization in the 1970s and 1980s, including Detroit, Long Beach, Los Angeles, and Oakland. Formerly employed American men of color lost their jobs as a result of factory shut downs and business relocation to international sites with cheaper labor. Their families were also circumscribed by cutbacks in social services that affected after-school programs and limited the areas where city children could play. Hip hop was a direct and explicit result of economic, social, and political forces that disproportionately affected Blacks and Latinos. It emerged as their response to the recession of the Reagan years, increasing policing, the crack epidemic, and the rise of the prison industrial complex.

Some of the earliest rap songs, such as the Sugar Hill Gang's classic "Rapper's Delight," are considered party music. Even at that early age, though, hip-hop was already expressing its polyvalent perspectives. Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five's 1982 "The Message" decried the living conditions in urban areas. Just a few years later, gangsta rap became a prominent voice from the West Coast. The attention scholars and community leaders, such as C. Dolores

Tucker and Tipper Gore, paid to the violence and misogyny in gangsta rap has not been balanced by a close and engaged analysis of what the artists actually say in their lyrics about the realities of life in urban America. Many of the themes in rap music by Los Angeles's Ice Cube, N.W.A., and Cypress Hill indicted the corrupt policies that made it difficult for residents to get jobs while they simultaneously contended with heightened policing and the growth of an underground economy. The bold Black Nationalist perspectives espoused by Public Enemy, a group beloved by many of the Desi hip-hop artists I spoke with, were especially stirring and gave a framework for understanding their experiences as minorities (see especially their 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, containing the single "Don't Believe the Hype"). It showed these Brown youth that hip-hop was a way one could respond to the racism and marginality from which their middle-class status did not shield them (the members of Public Enemy met, after all, in college in Long Island).

In short, hip-hop hit the airwaves just as these youth were trying to make sense of their positions in either predominantly White suburban areas where they faced racism or in urban minority communities. They were able to make some sense of their understanding of American society through the politically explicit message of early rap music denouncing racism and indicting politicians and economic policies for the lack of opportunities. The music also historicized the Black experience within a context of slavery and ongoing disenfranchisement. These predominantly middle-class, non-White, Desi youth who loved music and who were becoming politicized (especially in college) found that hip-hop articulated their experiences as people of color in a racially stratified society. It was also through hip-hop that these artists later were able to express their own views about America and their racial and ethnic identities.

## Racial and Ethnic Hip-Hop

Hip-hop is an oral vehicle for speaking about personal histories and the issues that affect one's community. It was originally a counter-hegemonic resistant art form that challenged the status quo and gave voice to the underrepresented. Desi artists have picked up hip-hop along similar lines; they use it to express their identities—including ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, artistic, and political identities—and to articulate perspectives on pressing issues that concern members of groups, including Blacks, with whom they feel akin. How Desi artists define themselves and whom they consider "community" differs among them. Artists interested in defining and making a space for Desis as *South Asians* in America try to appeal to coethnics through musical content and forms that highlight their uniqueness as immigrants with culturally dis-

tinctive practices. On the other hand, artists who wish to be seen as emcees first and as South Asians second often identify with broader communities of color rather than with a more circumscribed ethnic identity. Their music tends to reflect a set of issues thought to concern Blacks and other underrepresented minorities for whom hip-hop has traditionally spoken. Thus, the artists' individual identities—whether they primarily identify as Desis, immigrants, hip-hop artists, or as minorities[13]—affect the kinds of music they create, which in turn shapes their target audiences.

Karmacy is a group that has cultivated a South Asian audience by successfully marketing an ethnic identity. At Manhattan's Knitting Factory, Karmacy developed the night's events with a series of artists and speakers that would appeal to this audience—around 90 to 95 percent of whom were South Asians under thirty. The show included an announcement by a South Asian woman about the importance of registering to vote, an Indian deejay who came with them from Los Angeles to spin hip-hop tracks, as well as the well-known radio personality Fat Man Scoop. Fat Man Scoop, a non-Desi, evidently understood this to be a Desi event as he repeatedly hyped "Indians" and "South Asians" in the house to raise their hands and holler, while also shouting out the sponsor, teenpatti.com. The aforementioned and apparently much beloved R&B singer Sandeep also took the stage in his "World Premier," followed by Canadian *tabla* virtuoso, Gurpreet, who played the *hang*, a rare Swiss instrument, and later joined Karmacy with the *dhol* (drum). Finally, before Karmacy took the stage, they lowered a screen in order to play the trailer of a new Desi film, *Quarter-Life Crisis*,[14] in which Sammy made his acting debut, along with a new Karmacy video. The merging of mainstream hip-hop through the presence of Hot 97FM with Karmacy, one of the most popular Desi hip-hop groups, marked a milestone in Desi hip-hop performance in the United States. Despite their circumscribed ethnic appeal, Karmacy has reached out to gain acknowledgement from non-Desi audiences while maintaining a South Asian fan base.

The men in my introduction were singing the chorus of "Blood Brothers," a song that details the connection between two brothers who in a transnational family. The track is melancholy and thoughtful; in one rendition, it begins with the sounds of breezy whirs coming through the speakers, followed by the notes of a sitar. The first verse is performed in Gujarati, by Swap, a contributor to this volume, followed by Nimo's verse in English:

Dear Bro, it's been a long time since we talked,
Four years since I stepped on that plane; how's mom and pops?
As for me, I'm working hard learning the ropes of the game.
I went from a nobody to lots of fortune and some fame.

In my own eyes, I think I'm doing really well;
I got lots of money, so tell nobody to worry 'bout my wealth.
As for my health, well, it could be a little better.
But take care of yourself; love, your bro;
I'll storm through this weather.

In the second verse of the song, the two rappers enact a conversation alternating from Gujarati to English. The English-speaking brother in America describes his economic success by pointing out his new suit: "I just got it tailored—Sergio Valente." However, his happiness upon hearing of the birth of his niece in India is bittersweet—he, himself, has no marriage prospects because in America "there's no time for all that, and I refuse to do a biodata." The compromises he faces as a result of immigrating become clear. The song concludes on a poignant note with the American brother (Nimo) firmly telling his counterpart in India, "No, I would never let you go through what I've gone through."

"Blood Brothers" describes an experience deeply familiar to the multitudes of immigrants in America. Even fans who may not understand the Gujarati lyrics feel the song's impact because many of their own families are transnational and bilingual. "Blood Brothers" has traces of our own parents' telephone conversations with family members in Asia. "Blood Brothers" and other songs, like "Horizons," which incorporate Spanish lyrics, have themes that reflect the changing demographics of major cities across the United States. They resonate with immigrants, including East Asians and Latinos, who are also members of the new second generation. While some songs make broad connections across immigrant groups, others are about the specific experiences of South Asians in the United States.

Over the past ten years Karmacy has gained popularity and name recognition among Desis by making music with sounds and content that appeal to South Asian American youth. The group's name, ethno-national backgrounds shared by the four rappers, use of Indian musical instruments on their produced tracks and live performances, multilingual music, and song themes all reflect this identity. The live performance at the Knitting Factory was the culmination of these factors, cultivating a space where Desis could revel in a shared identity with a room full of other people, without having to explain its subtleties.

Other artists, like Chee Malabar of Himalayan Project and Feenom Circle's Rawj, decline to have their artistry qualified by their ethnic identity. Rather, they write raps and record tracks that sound more familiar to broader underground (as opposed to commercial) hip-hop fans. Their music is less ethnically identifiable, although occasionally they mention immigration and their motherland. Overall, racialized hip-hop falls into existing genres and sounds,

such as underground hip-hop, conscious rap, or having a "Bay Area" or "East Coast" sound, rather than the relatively new productions that sound "ethnic." These artists wish to appeal to fans across color lines who like thoughtful hip-hop by skillful emcees, and in order to attract such audiences Chee and Rawj perform in hip-hop venues where their music addresses issues that resonate with members of various groups.

Chee Malabar and Rainman form Himalayan Project. Chee's lyrics critique the Bush administration with specific references to Iraq. He calls America out on its unfulfilled civil-rights promises and draws connections among minority communities that face racism and unfair policing. On recent tracks, Chee identifies with India (the country from which he migrated), crosses religious lines by denouncing anti-Muslim hatred (he is not a Muslim), and expresses his anger through the voices of notable Black figures, such as Malcolm X. His songs also historicize Black and South Asian relations by evoking the Middle Passage, illuminating histories of slavery and the indentured labor that brought Africans, Indians, and Chinese to the Caribbean. Chee's self-presentation in some online photos and videos also blurs distinctions between communities in conflict—he sometimes fashions his beard and hair in a way that may make him look Muslim, despite living in New York where he is already targeted for his Brown skin. He addresses this particular situation on a recent track, "Oblique Brown," on his solo project of the same name.

An older track, "Beyond This," is an aggressive, fast-paced song marked by staccato sounds interrupted by a slowed-down chorus sung by Chee in a wavering voice. The first verse showcases his skills, boasting and challenging other emcees. He begins by telling listeners to "face the faceless, my words on tapes an oasis in desert plains" and threatens to "crane style lame brains flat as pancakes, get gripped and shook like a mafuckin' handshake." After setting the stage by claiming his place (his rhymes are as welcome as an "oasis in desert plains") and threatening to use martial arts aggression on "lame brains," the rapper gets into his real verbal beef in the following verse:

West Coast flow, gracin' your headphones, epic poems,
Set in this dead tone, jewel set in September stones,
Flow for sons of slaves, brave races who escaped from caves,
Engrave my fate on breaks for Brown ones,
Who entered the fight night, not knowing it was fixed since round one,
Spent the rest of the night, drunk-high, vibin' off Bob Nesta,
Wrestle with bleak socioeconomic plight,
Life amongst politicians, preachers, cheaters, they all alike.
Life embedded in politicians' chronic lies, that's why,
I stay red and reach for skies with chronic fire,
Pneumonic surprise, came from a land of damned cries to find,
The U.S.A means, U Shouldn't've Arrived.

In the above verse, Chee delivers an "epic poem." He considers the plight of past slaves in what he sees as today's politically corrupt and socioeconomically bankrupt America. "Politicians' chronic lies," like preachers' and cheaters', lead him to find solace in Robert Nesta Marley's (a.k.a. Bob Marley) revolutionary reggae music, which may further inspire his thoughts about political corruption and the plight of the disadvantaged. Chee refers to his own birth in September and places himself amongst the other "sons of slaves" and Brown people for whom he rhymes. He continues to make links between Blacks and South Asians by references to slavery throughout the album. Like the title of the album, *The Middle Passage*, *slaves* refers to both Africans in the Atlantic slave trade and Indian indentured laborers who labored in Trinidad, Fiji, Guyana, and Surinam. Perhaps Chee's herb-induced awareness leads to a "pneumonic surprise"—a revelation that when the United States of America says to bring "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,"[15] she actually means to tell immigrants like Chee "*U S*houldn't've *A*rrived."

## Last Track

Malabar and other artists who create racialized rap music appeal to those concerned about disenfranchisement and inequality. This relationship between performers and consumers is developed through musical content, performance venues, and the stylistic choices of the track production that sound familiar to hip-hop listeners. Chee uses music to make connections between communities that seem to have little in common. On the other hand, groups like Karmacy create ethnic hip-hop and act as cultural brokers across generations within their ethnic communities. They speak to shared experiences as the children of immigrants and celebrate multiple linguistic, cultural, and acoustic practices by incorporating them into their songs and shows. Desi artists use hip-hop—a Black art form that offered counterhegemonic critiques of systemic oppression from its inception—to engage with their own communities while expressing racial *and* ethnic identities.[16] Much of their music is explicitly politicized and directed toward a critique of American society and its capitalist engine at large. From this position of resistant critique, they engage with and are able to bridge issues of concern that are often seen as relevant only to other groups, such as Blacks and first-generation South Asians.

Both Chee and Rawj voice their perspectives to crowds that may be unfamiliar with *South Asian* rappers, while Nimo, Swap, KB, and Sammy of Karmacy offer an ethnic identity to audiences that may be unfamiliar with South Asian

*rappers.* Though they produce different kinds of hip-hop that target particular audiences, these artists complement one another in bringing more attention to the polyvalent perspectives of Desis claiming space in the public arena.

## Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of ethnic and racialized hip-hop, see Nitasha Sharma, *Claiming Space, Making Race: South Asian American Hip-Hop Artists* (Durham: Duke University Press, at press).

2. Alejandro Portes, *The New Second Generation.* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996). Min Zhou and Carl Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the U.S.* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998). Ruben Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Sharmila Rudrappa, *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American: Indian Immigrants and the Cultures of Citizenship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

3. Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Robin Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2001). Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics of Hip-Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

4. See the previously cited authors.

5. See Vijay Prashad, "Ethnic Studies Inside Out," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 2006). See also Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

6. Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants among Post-1965 Immigrant Youth," *Annals*, no. 530 (1993): 74–96. Min Zhou, "Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation," *International Migration Review*, 31, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 975–1,008. Min Zhou and Carl Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the U.S.* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998). Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For a rebuttal, see Roger Waldinger and Cynthia Feliciano, "Will the New Second Generation Experience 'Downward Assimilation'? Segmented Assimilation Re-assessed," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 3 (May 2004): 376–402.

7. For an additional critique, see Purkayastha 2005.

8. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991). Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). For an overview, see Claire Jean Kim and Taeku Lee, "Interracial Politics: Asian Americans and Other Communities of Color," *Political Science and Politics* 34, no. 3 (September 2001): 631–37.

9. See the March 2007 *Asian Week* column "Why I Hate Blacks," by Kenneth Eng.

10. Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

11. A *hip-hop head* is another term for a hard-core hip-hop fan who is generally knowledgeable about hip-hop.

12. Nitasha Sharma, "Musical Manifestos: Desi Hip-Hop Artists Sound Off on Capitalism and Sexism," *The Subcontinental: The Journal of South Asian American Public Affairs* 3, Issue 1 (Spring 2007): 25–38. Nitasha Sharma, *Claiming Space, Making Race: South Asian American Hip-Hop Artists* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

13. These identities are of course experienced simultaneously. At particular moments, however, such as when the artists make decisions about the content and sounds of their music in the recording studio, they select specific symbols and ideas for expression.

14. *Quarter-Life Crisis*, directed by Kiran Merchant (2006).

15. Emma Lazarus's poem, written in 1883, is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty.

16. Undeniably, they also use hip-hop to develop and express gender, sexual, and class identities. For more on this, see Nitasha Sharma, 2007.

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# 3
# Hip-Hop Agitprop

*Ajay Nair*

THE YEAR IS 1983. I'm a nine-year-old boy perfecting my windmill, popping technique, and flares. Newcleus has released Jam-On's *Revenge* and their follow-up single "Jam On It." I'm a fifth grader at Wilmer F. Loomis Elementary school in Broomall, Pennsylvania. We're one of the first Asian families to move into this lily-white middle-class neighborhood.

We were movin' on up. Media images, my parents, and my friends all made it clear to me then that "up" was where the White people belong and "down" is where Blacks should stay. As a kid, I wondered how I changed from Black to White—from West and Southwest Philly to the 'burbs—all in a matter of a few years. Being Desi wasn't an option, or at least it wasn't an option in Broomall. I was Black in the eyes of my peers, and they were "up," at the top of the food chain, and I needed to climb as fast as I could.

At least once a month, my family and the handful of other Nair[1] families in Philadelphia traveled to New York to join the much larger Nair Malayalee[2] community in the activities of the Nair Benevolent Association of New York. When we weren't in New York, my weekends were spent in Philadelphia with other Indian families, mostly Malayalee Christians. By the late 1980s, with the arrival of the extended family members of the handful of Nair families already in Philadelphia, the Nair Society of the Delaware Valley was created. As my family dedicated its energy to our own local community, our trips to New York became infrequent and our interaction with the diverse Indian community of Philadelphia diminished. The maintenance of my family's cultural identity was tied up intricately in our cultural and religious organizations. But as a young boy, I had found hip-hop, a space that wouldn't accept the narrow

boundaries constructed for me by these organizations. Hip-hop was a space that I thought I could carry with me forever and everywhere.

As I traversed multiple cultural fields, I found a home in all of them, but only if I was boioing.[3] At Malayalee parties, the kids would gather in the basement, play games, and listen to music. When hip-hop sounds filled the air, I was at the center of the room dancing. At my White suburban school, I would carry my boombox during recess to bring together the Michael Jackson fans; my attempts to play RUN DMC and Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five failed miserably! The "rockers" were on the other side of the playground listening to Journey, The Police, Def Leppard, and Stevie Nicks. It wasn't so much a balancing act as it was a polycultural journey.

Hip-hop made me question my Brown skin. Hip-hop made me question my near-Whiteness as a model minority. Hip-hop helped me find Blackness. In Ellie Hisama's exploration of *Afro-Asian Crosscurrents in Contemporary Hip Hop*, she writes that to be Black "is to belong to a political, social, and cultural category rather than a biological one. What sets in motion the dynamic polycultural complexity of these musicians is their dreams of liberation, shared by those who are not just looking for a place to survive, but who are in search of something better."[4] I no longer had to just survive; liberation was my goal, and hip-hop was my guide. Years later, hip-hop led me to an academic life that allowed me to deconstruct my racialized, gendered, and sexualized experiences as a Desi.

## Where Are All the Desis?

On April 10, 2006, 140 cities joined a national protest against anti-immigrant legislation. I marched with a group of about thirty Latino and Asian American students (I was one of three South Asian Americans) from the University of Pennsylvania to Love Park where Philadelphians joined the national protest. During the march, one of my South Asian American students turned to me in disgust and said, "Where are all the Desis?"

At the time I was teaching an Asian American Studies course at the University of Pennsylvania. I encouraged students in my course to attend the rally. I also invited a guest speaker to my class from Asian Americans United to speak about the impact of anti-immigrant legislation on Asian Americans.[5] Ten days later, one of my students informed me that there were several blogs critiquing my pedagogical strategies and my politics. I was struck that there was no mention that I was teaching an Asian American Studies course. Instead, Asian American Studies was conflated with Asian Studies,[6] and I was ostensibly an "activist faculty" member who used his classroom as an "ideological soapbox."[7]

As Glenn Omatsu reminds us, the founding vision of Asian American Studies "emphasized a critical link between learning about society and changing it. Education was defined as not merely imparting information to students but promoting critical awareness and encouraging political engagement."[8] In chapter 1 of this volume, Vijay Prashad considers hip-hop and Desi lives in polycultural terms. "Cultures are not spatially sealed. Cultural worlds are created in relationship with other cultural worlds. They interact; they are alive. There are no boundaries, only centers." A polycultural framework enables us to reclaim the radical and emancipatory founding vision of Asian American Studies, constructively and critically consider South Asian American identity, and raise important epistemological questions.

It is through the lens of Asian American Studies and hip-hop that I consider the question of "Where are all the Desis?" The question is deeper than just our representation at political events: How do South Asian Americans construct spaces where we can mobilize, have a voice, and challenge the narrow boundaries that constrain South Asian American identity? How does hip-hop lend its voice to struggles in our community? The immigration-reform debate presents a critical moment for the South Asian American community. Do we stand side by side with communities of color who oppose anti-immigrant legislation? Do we support our own community members who are undocumented, taxpaying, and law-abiding? How do we construct a South Asian American community that is truly inclusive?

Karmacy's "Blood Brothers" reminds us that Desis have a stake in immigrant rights. In "Blood Brothers," Nimo and Swap humanize the condition of South Asian immigrants by rapping a familiar immigrant story in both English and Gujarati:

> Maro bhai, mane lageche ke thane bho faveche. [My brother, it seems to me that you're doing fine.]
> Saru tho jivan jivo pun thabyat kevi lageche? Good, live your life; but how's your health?
> Mami ne papa ni yaad aveche ke bulighayo? [Do you ever think of Mom and Dad, or have you forgotten them?]
> Emni thabyat bagdeche jare thu pasai pache padigayo. [They've been getting sick while you've been chasing your money.]
> Harigayo, ah jingi aveche ne jaiche. [You've really lost; this life waits for no one.]
> Saru to maro bhai, saro bhai, thu maro dhai chu. [Fine then my brother, my good brother.]
> Tho maro bhailu; thu maro dhil chu. [You are my soul, you are my heart.]
> Seni mate avirete jivan jivu chu? [But why are you living your life like this?]

Despite the familiarity of the immigrant struggle, many of us fail to acknowledge the pervasive and pernicious anti-immigrant sentiment. In the

current immigration-reform debate, public hysteria regarding national security has compelled many to legitimize the criminalization of undocumented workers. Given the current climate on immigration reform, it is no surprise that 85 percent of immigrants today are people of color. Anti-immigrant sentiment is a symbol of regnant racism shrouded in America's post 9/11 fears. In the name of national security, the most vulnerable have become the prey.

People of color became convenient scapegoats for terrorism after the 9/11 tragedy. As we consider our position on the issue of immigration reform, it is important to consider the many cases of deportation, detention, special registration, and hate crimes that devastated our community after 9/11 and continue to tear apart lives and families today. Following 9/11, more than 1,200 persons were detained without being directly linked to or charged with the terrorist attacks.[9] A report by South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow found over 645 *reported* incidents of bias against South Asians and Arab Americans in the week following 9/11.

If post–9/11 anti-immigrant sentiment isn't reason enough to support responsible immigration reform, at the very least the history of anti-Asian discrimination should give us pause. In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind, a Berkeley graduate and World War I veteran, sought to become a naturalized citizen. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "Hindus" are aliens ineligible for citizenship. By 1924, further immigration from India was barred. It wasn't until 1946 that Asian Indians could naturalize and become citizens. Today, anti-immigrant legislation continues "a historical tradition of racialization of foreign nationals, whereby government policies are used to mark non-White noncitizens, who are socially and materially vulnerable, with a lesser racial and legal status."[10]

> "Yup, guess I'm America's worst nightmare,
> cause I'm young, Brown, and look Middle Eastern."
> "Yea, now get out the car, hands up, knees on the floor."
> I said, "My sister went to Seton Hall, I know about the law";
> he's like, "Dude, your face is probable cause."
> —Chee Malabar, "Oblique Brown"

## Horizons

We live in a country built upon racial hierarchies where near-White status via the model-minority myth can be extremely enticing. In an inherently racist ideology, the myth claims that the success of Desis and other Asian Americans can serve as an exemplar for Blacks and Latinos. While many Asian Americans have achieved great success, the myth does not account for the 1.5 million un-

documented Asians in America who do not fit the model-minority image. Nor does the myth account for the new working-class migration of Desis. In our quest for model minorityhood, our cabbies, restaurant workers, convenience-store clerks, and gas-station attendants are marginalized and not treated as truly and really part of South Asian America.

The relative success of Asian Americans has been attributed to cultural values or genetic superiority while ignoring the process of state selection to meet U.S. labor needs.[11] The myth fails to acknowledge the impact of the Immigration Act of 1965, which selectively recruited highly educated immigrants to meet U.S. economic needs particularly in science and medicine. The claim that Asian Americans are genetically superior has been refuted by empirical data. Moreover, the cultural interpretation of high achievement among Asian Americans is simplistic and does not take into account of variety of factors that influence the relative success of Asian Americans.[12]

No one imagined that the Immigration Act of 1965 would transform America's cultural landscape so dramatically. In Vijay Prashad's *Karma of Brown Folk*, in reference to the model-minority myth he asks us "how can we live with ourselves as we are pledged and sometimes, in acts of bad faith, pledge ourselves as a weapon against Black folk?" We can extend this question to Desis in opposition to humane immigration reform. House Bill 4427 (Sensenbrenner-King Bill) was passed by the House by a 239 to 182 vote. This bill, among other reprehensible things, would criminalize undocumented workers and those who assist them. For instance, any social-service agency that assists undocumented people would be subject to criminal penalties. On April 10, 2006, several South Asian American organizations issued a public statement regarding immigration reform. The statement urged Congress to "pass immigration reform that respects the civil rights of immigrants." The statement called for legislation that will *not* "lead to separated families, isolation and fear, and distrust of law enforcement and government officials." The statement also called for, among other things, "opposing criminalization of undocumented status and expansion of grounds for indefinite detention" and "reducing the visa backlog by eliminating visa caps and expediting the processing of applications."[13]

Progressive Desi conversations on immigration reform are emerging from many different circles and at many different levels. Despite the small number of Desis who marched with us to Love Park in Philadelphia, we were empowered by those who stood with us and by the spirit of progressive Desis across the country. My student who questioned the integrity of the South Asian American community at the beginning of the march was furnished with a sense of hopefulness by the end of the march. We marched to the beat of a Chyango (Korean drum), held signs of protest against anti-immigrant

legislation, chanted proimmigrant slogans, and were even joined by a piper who graced us with the rich sounds of the Irish bagpipe. This firsthand experience for students, albeit brief, surely challenged the socially and politically constructed racial and cultural boundaries that are reinforced in our educational systems.

Luckily, the initial plan of chartering a bus from Penn to travel twenty blocks to the rally site didn't materialize. The student organizers feared that the "long" walk would deter students from participating. The privilege of being part of an Ivy League community wasn't completely lost; we had a police escort nearly the entire way to Love Park. For some of us, our privilege stands in our way of empathizing with the struggles of undocumented workers or working-class immigrants.

We were also quickly reminded of the challenges of community building as we descended upon Love Park. The Latino students from Penn gradually joined a mostly Latino crowd in the heart of Love Park while the Asian American students searched for Asian faces in the crowd. Many Asian Americans elected to take part in a march originating in Chinatown that would eventually feed into the Love Park rally. This particular march in Chinatown centered on the "Justice for Mrs. Jiang" case, which is intimately linked to the anti-immigrant legislation. On February 7, 2006, Mrs. Jiang Zhenxing miscarried her twins after being "dragged by immigration agents into a van and taken to JFK airport in New York City for immediate deportation to China." Mrs. Jiang was taken away while her husband and two children waited outside the Philadelphia Immigration and Customs Enforcement office, unaware that Mrs. Jiang Zhenxing was being taken away.[14]

When the participants in the march that originated from Chinatown arrived to the rally site, they were met by a police barricade meant to control traffic and the huge crowd. The police barricade prevented many Asian American participants from standing side by side with their Latino brothers and sisters. The Asian American Penn students, along with the participants of the feeder march, eventually found their way to the other side of Love Park where a separate, but not entirely disconnected, rally emerged. Despite the disjointed mobilizing effort at Love Park, most participants will hopefully remember the polycultural experience: the shared struggle and benefits of coalition building. Karmacy's song "Horizons," with lyrics in Spanish, Punjabi, Gujarati, and English, inspires us to explore the intersections between communities of color:

> We need to push the flame so we're looking up higher.
> We need to spark our minds so we never get tired.
> We're grabbin' mics out the sky too we realizin' that it all ties in vertically rizin'.

The immigration-reform debate is only one example of how hip-hop can influence and shape our views on critical issues.

My purpose in writing this essay is not to romanticize the power of hip-hop: "hip-hop is not the revolution; it only provides an opening."[15] The opening that hip-hop provides has allowed us to experience the important work of artists like Karmacy, Chee Malabar, and others represented and not represented in this volume. Where are all the Desis? Listen to the progressive sounds of the artists in this book, and they will lead you to what it means to be Desi. We won't know *where* all the Desis are until we know *who* they are. Hip-hop may be the guiding light we need to construct South Asian America.

## Notes

1. Nair is a caste from the state of Kerala in India.

2. Malayalee people are natives of the state of Kerala, India.

3. *Boioing* is an African word that means *to hop or jump*. The term *b-boying* originated from *boioing*.

4. Ellie Hisama. "Afro-Asian Crosscurrents in Contemporary Hip Hop." *ISAM Newsletter* 32, no. 1, 2002.

5. Asian Americans United (AAU) is a Philadelphia-based Asian American activist group that "exists so that people of Asian ancestry in Philadelphia exercise leadership to build their communities and unite to challenge oppression."

6. www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2006/04/is-activism-in-classroom-justifiable.html.

7. www.goactablog.org/blog/archives/2006/04/#a000161.

8. G. Omatsu. *Defying a Thousand Pointing Fingers and Serving the Children: Reenvisioning the Mission of Asian American Studies in Our Communities.* Los Angeles: University of California Asian American Studies Center, 1999.

9. David H. Hernandez. *Undue Process: Immigrant Detention, Due Process, and Lesser Citizenship.* Institute for the Study of Social Change. ISSC Fellows Working Papers. University of California, Berkeley, 2005.

10. Ibid.

11. See *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein R. and C. Murray, 1994) for an argument favoring genetic factors in intelligence. For a cultural interpretation of high achievement see E. R. Mordowitz and H. P. Ginsberg, "Early Academic Socialization of Successful Asian American College Students." *Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition* 9 (1987): 85–91.

12. S. Sue and S. Okazaki. "Asian-American Educational Achievements: A Phenomenon in Search of an Explanation." In D. T. Nakanishi and T. Y. Nishida (eds.), *The Asian American Educational Experience: A Source Book for Teachers and Students* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 133–45.

13. See www.saalt.org/news_4-10-06.html for more information on the South Asian American statement on immigration reform.

14. Email communication from Asian Americans United in Philadelphia, Penn.

15. Quotation from Jeff Chang during a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania titled "Rap, Race, and Black-Asian Relations."

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# 4

# B-Boys and Bass Girls: Sex, Style, and Mobility in Indian American Youth Culture

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New York City has been home to a flourishing youth subculture created by second-generation South Asian Americans that has raised important questions about racialization, class mobility, and gender and sexual politics. Particularly since the 1990s, youth from families that migrated from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have produced a subculture centering on music and dance and performed at Desi (South Asian) parties, clubs, and restaurants in the city. Young South Asian deejays have mixed Hindi film music and bhangra, a Punjabi (North Indian and Pakistani) dance and music, with the beats of American rap, techno, jungle, and reggae. In this article, I focus on the sampling of hip-hop by Indian American youth at a particular moment, the mid- to late-1990s, and the implications that this remix youth subculture has for their social relationships with Black youth and their political understandings of race.

As with all forms of popular culture, this subculture has evolved and grown and a new generation of Desi artists has increasingly begun to produce hip-hop itself (not to mention mainstream hip-hop's sampling of South Asian music). However, the larger questions sparked by the subculture I focused on at that historical moment are still paramount—that is, how do second-generation Indian American or Desi youth position themselves vis-à-vis African American youth and other youth of color within the racial formation of the United States? I argue that the turn to hip-hop in Desi youth culture is part of

a racial project used to negotiate notions of authentic Indianness, on the one hand, and ideologies of class mobility and representations of Blackness, on the other. Both the fantasies of being authentically "Indian" and of "Blackness" are deeply gendered and sexualized through performances that I view as central to understanding the racial project of this subculture. In this article, I offer a materialist analysis of sexuality as performed in this youth culture, linking cultural nostalgia to wet dreams of escape from the model-minority myth.

This article is based on an ethnographic study of second-generation Indian American college youth studying in Manhattan (Maira 2002), who were generally from lower-middle-class to upper-middle-class backgrounds. The issue of class clearly informs the argument about mobility and racialization, for youth culture is a site where young people can perform social identities, drawing on notions of "difference" or "freedom" marketed by the music, fashion, and media industries. Consumption is an important terrain for the negotiation of racial projects by youth because the use of music and fashion to express social identities in adolescence is an option made available by particular industries, who target youth as eager consumers. It is also important to note, however, that remix-music parties are just one of many social spaces that youth traverse on a daily basis, and the racial ideologies negotiated in this space are linked to the experiences of youth at school and work or in family and peer relationships, as I will discuss here.

This article traces the complex and often contradictory discourses and performances of race, gender, and sexuality in this subculture at a particular moment when the Indian remix-music and party scene exploded in New York City. I want to note that while some of the basic questions about racialization, gender, and class have persisted, the answers may look different today and new questions have emerged, with new currents in hip-hop and particularly after the events of 9/11 and the wars in South Asia and the Middle East. I allude very briefly to some of these historical shifts here, but they deserve a much more extended analysis.

The subculture that sprang up in New York around Indian remix music in the 1990s included participants whose families originate from other countries of the subcontinent besides India, in particular Pakistan or Bangladesh, but these events were still coded as the "Indian party scene" or "Desi scene."[1] The word *Desi* signifies a pan–South Asian rubric increasingly emphasized in the second generation that literally means *of South Asia* (desh), especially in the context of the diaspora. Yet there is an unevenness in the construction of this term, as Indians often dominate most putatively South Asian student organizations, and before 2001 especially Pakistan and Bangladesh remained largely invisible in a U.S. mainstream media preoccupied with a presumably "Indian" popular culture, glossing over the commonalities with as well as the peculiarities of this vision of "India." Even after 2001, though, India has remained a se-

ductive signifier of the "exotic" in contrast to Pakistan, which is associated with the threat of "Islamic terrorism," fundamentalism, and "anti-Western" militancy.[2] For Desi youth themselves, there has obviously been a range of ways national attachments and regional identifications are understood and performed, and the use of North Indian/Pakistani music and dance, or even Hindi film music, to stand in for "South Asian" produces varying degrees of ambivalence or tension for those who do not affiliate with these cultural forms, for varying reasons.

## Bhangra Beats and Desi Parties

Bhangra remix music constitutes a transnational popular culture circulating in the Indian and South Asian diaspora. It emerged among British-born South Asian youth in the mid-1980s and since then has flowed between New York, Delhi, Bombay, Toronto, Port-of-Spain, and other nodes of the South Asian diaspora (Gopinath 1997; Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996). Although this "remix youth culture" has grown in other urban areas in the United States that have large Indian American populations, such as Chicago and the San Francisco Bay Area, these expressions are necessarily shaped by local contexts. The New York setting lends certain distinctive features to this youth culture in Manhattan: DJ Tony, of TS Soundz in Chicago, pointed out that whereas Chicago remixes tended to rely on house and techno beats, New York deejays favored remixes with rap, and Desi youth tended to adopt a more overtly "hoody," hip-hop-inspired style (Sengupta 1996). Hip-hop in this subculture, however, is remixed with elements of Indian popular culture (folk and Hindi film music) and Indo-chic style (bindis, nose rings), even as it remains a powerful referent for this youth subculture. The politics of the remix youth subculture emerges in the context of a very specific, hybridized cultural formation and is not always coeval with that of what DJ Key Kool called "Asian Americans *in* hip-hop."[3] There has remained, however, a parallel, but not always convergent, subculture of Desi youth who listen primarily to rap and identify mainly with hip-hop and who, especially at the time, were on the fringes of the Desi party scene.

The "party scene" has always been a differentiated one: there are Desi youth who are not in college and who also attend these parties, and there are "Indian parties" outside Manhattan, such as in New Jersey and Long Island, where there are large South Asian student populations. Manhattan, however, provided a particular context for Desi parties because of the presence of city clubs, the erstwhile China Club and S.O.B.'s Dinner Club (Sounds of Brazil), that have drawn droves of South Asian American youth, who get down to the beats of bhangra. S.O.B.'s, a world-music club in downtown Manhattan, was

home to one of the most well-known regular "bhangra parties" since March 1997, when DJ Rekha launched Basement Bhangra, the first Indian remix-music night to be featured on the calendar of a Manhattan club—and the first to be hosted by a woman deejay. The phenomenon of Desi parties grew out of the larger structure of clubbing, where nightclubs host parties or theme nights that are ethnically, racially, and sexually segregated, and deejays spin the right kind of mix for their target audience, as noted in a special *New York Times Magazine* issue on New York subcultures: "If you club in New York these days, you spend your daylight hours in a living, breathing United Nations and end your nights in an all-but-segregated society. There are the Italian American jams (where they spin house and hip-hop), Russian-Jewish (hip-hop, R&B), gay (dance, house, disco), Black highbrow (hip-hop, R&B, soul), Black lowbrow (hip-hop, hip-hop, hip-hop)" (Touré 1997, 98). The marking of distinctions such as "lowbrow" and "highbrow," associated with particular club spaces and music genres, illustrates the ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes's observation about the production of social spaces *in* music: "The musical event . . . evokes and organizes collective memories and present [sic] experiences of place with an intensity, power, and simplicity. . . . The 'places' constructed through music involve notions of difference and social boundary. They also organize hierarchies of a moral and political order" (1994: 3). It is this power of music, and dance, to evoke a sense of "place" in a social hierarchy as well as provide a spatial location—the nightclub or party—that makes possible the collective nostalgia for India as well as the gauging of subcultural status evident at remix music parties (Maira 1999). Given the pervasiveness of cultural consumption as a site for negotiating social and class hierarchies, music is a ritual important for the socialization of youth into racialized, ethnicized, and class-specific subcultures that extend in scale from local to transnational.

The music at Desi parties is remixed by Indian American deejays who perform at events hosted at local clubs, restaurants, and college campuses by party promoters, generally young Desi men and women, some of whom are college students and who do this as a source of part-time income, in the process helping to establish an urban, Desi youth subculture.[4] Every weekend, remix parties in Manhattan attract Desi youth from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and even Pennsylvania, areas that have large concentrations of South Asian immigrant families as well as Desi student populations. Cover charges are steep but not atypical for New York parties, yet the parties draw hordes of youth from a range of class backgrounds who are willing to fork out money for leisure activities. Partygoers are for the most part second generation, although there are generally some first-generation South Asians in the crowd as well who participate in the redefinition of Desi "cool," in its urban, New York/Northeast incarnation. In conjunction with the fusion of musical genres, this subculture displays the construction of a culturally hybrid style,

such as wearing Indian-style nose rings and bindis with hip-hop fashion, and performing ethnic identity through dance, as in the borrowing of folk dance gestures from bhangra while gyrating to club remixes. Underlying the debates about youth culture is always the problem of consumption and the relationship of youth to the labor market, for there are Desi youth who are not in college and who attend these parties, and there are strains of materiality and class mobility that are mixed with the vibes of nostalgia in this subculture.

The creation of this Desi youth culture in Manhattan has, in part, been made possible by the presence of large, local South Asian immigrant communities. For example, New York City has the largest concentration of Indians of any metropolitan area.[5] Although the earlier wave of Indian immigrants who arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s and spread to the suburbs of America were mainly professionals and graduate students, New York City and New Jersey have seen an influx of South Asian immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s who are less affluent and not as highly educated. Working-class Indian immigrants, or middle-class Indians who could not find the jobs they had hoped for, sometimes find employment in the service sector or unskilled labor market (Lessinger 1995). The second reason that has motivated many Indian immigrants to settle in New York City, at least initially, is that many immigrated through family reunification categories, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, and chose to live close to relatives already settled in the area or in localities where they knew there were other Indian families. The children of both of these waves of immigration, and class segments of the South Asian American community, began coming of age in the 1980s, entering college and the workforce. For youth who grew up in the multiethnic neighborhoods of Queens or New Jersey, remix youth culture offers a space in which to combine the different cultural resonances with which they grew up, mixing affiliations with Black and Latino youth culture with music played at Indian weddings and the soundtrack of Hindi films—although not without contradictory impulses, as I will show.

## Subcultural Theory and Second-Generation Youth Culture

Viewing this Indian American youth music and youth style as products of a subculture draws on the particular tradition of neo-Marxist cultural studies associated with the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the U.K. and is an attempt to highlight the importance of their incipient materialist ethnography (Kirschner 1998, Turner 1996). *Youth subculture* refers to a social group that is distinguished by age or generation, but theorists of youth subcultures also note that the category of "youth" is one that is socially and culturally constructed and has often been the focus of debates over social control

as well as a marketing principle for the music and fashion industries (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts 1976; Hebdige 1979). The Birmingham school understood youth subcultures as collective responses to the personal, political, and economic contradictions or crises that youth confront on the brink of adulthood (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts 1976). The Birmingham school's approach to subcultures has met with some criticism from cultural-studies theorists and sociologists who point out that this school of subcultural theory often overinterpreted social action in terms of resistance and symbolic resolution (Cohen 1997; Epstein 1998). Contemporary subcultural theorists and researchers have a more complex vision of subcultures but still find useful and build on the basic tenets of subcultural theory, reaching back to its early roots in the Chicago school of sociology (Duncombe 1998; Leblanc 1999; Sardiello 1998).

Theorists such as Tricia Rose (1994a, 1994b) and George Lipsitz (1994a) have analyzed hip-hop as a subculture whose musical form, lyrical content, style, and attitude embody a critique of the condition of urban youth facing unemployment, racism, and marginalization in a postindustrial economy. Rose (1994b, 82) suggests that rituals of clothing and the creation of a distinctive hip-hop style show not only an "explicit focus on consumption" but offer an alternative means of attaining status for urban African American and Latino youth who have limited opportunities for social mobility (see also Chang 2005). Rose describes hip-hop as a hybrid cultural form that relies on Afro-Caribbean and African American musical, oral, visual, and dance practices. Thus it weaves a commentary on existing circumstances with references to ancestral cultures from the Afro-Caribbean diaspora to create a "counter-dominant narrative."

Although interpretations of resistance and oppositionality have been problematized in contemporary youth-culture studies, the politics of hip-hop as a social movement become apparent when juxtaposing the experiences of the youth Rose describes with those of the Indian American youth in this study. By sampling Indian music, second-generation youth draw on the sounds from Hindi movies and Indian music that their parents introduced to them as children in order to inculcate an "Indian" identity, sometimes with overt strains of cultural nostalgia for an imaginary homeland frozen in time (see Maira 2002). By remixing these Indian beats with rap and reggae and donning hip-hop "gear" or the appropriate brand-name labels, Indian Americans display the markers of subcultural affiliation and material status used in a multiethnic commodity culture. These second-generation youth occupy a very different class and racial location from most Black and Latino youth in New York City, but they have adopted certain elements of hip-hop in fashioning their own second-generation style, particularly the use of clothing, of dialect, and

of musical bricolage. What does this particular performance of ethnic "cool" tell us about the racial and ethnic locations Indian American youth are choosing for themselves and what are the political implications of adopting hip-hop for Indian American youth in the context of the Black/White polarity of the United States?

### Hoods and Hoochy Mamas: The Innocence of Tradition

The politics of "cool" in this hip-hop-inflected youth subculture become apparent in the contestation of sexual and gender roles and of racialized images of desire in the sexually charged environment of the dance floor. The vibe at Desi parties is generally heterosexist, perhaps not too different from many other nightclubs, with the exception of parties that are more queer friendly and attract slightly older crowds, such as the defiantly non-bhangra party Mutiny, which was cohosted by DJ Siraiki and DJ Rekha and had an explicitly progressive mandate encapsulated in its name. Notions of style and body image are embedded in deeper contradictions in the constructions of gender and heterosexual roles that are played out in remix youth culture and that are contested by some who find this constricting. This contestation is played out in both gendered and racialized terms, with an underlying concern about appropriate femininity and the perils of racial border crossing. Manisha, who grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Spring Valley (now New City), New Jersey, and whose friends were mainly African American and Latino, often dressed in hip-hop gear with a gold "Om" pendant dangling around her neck. She reflected:

> Guys can get away with [the "hoody" look], but girls who are considered "cool" dress prettier. I think the guys are intimidated by that [girls with a hip-hop look]; it's taken as a sign of being closer to Latinos or Blacks, of being outside of the Indian circle, as I am. . . . The guys may think we're rougher or not as sweet.

Women are expected to embody a certain kind of ethnic affiliation through style and through the performance of a demurely authentic Indian American femininity that resists identifications with African American and Latino(a) cultures.

There seemed to be two kinds of heterosexual femininities idealized within this second-generation subculture that fit into the virgin/'ho (whore) dichotomy; these not only contradict the "gangsta girl" image of Black-identified femininity but also, through opposition to each other, evoke the deeper tensions between desires for nostalgia and "coolness." On the one hand, men as well as women spoke of an idealized "chaste" femininity that was conflated

with authentic Indian "tradition." On the other hand, many women noted that the sexually provocative style of women at remix parties—the "hoochy mamas"—was considered more alluring than the androgynous hip-hop look and more seductive than chaste Indian womanhood. I have argued elsewhere that the chastity of second-generation women becomes emblematic of not just the family's reputation but also, in the context of the diaspora, of the purity of tradition and ethnic identity (Maira 2002). This chaste, presumably unhybridized femininity becomes a defense against the promiscuity of "American influences" and of the ethnic betrayal enacted through adopting a presumably Black or Latino style, as suggested by feminist and postcolonial analyses of the gendering of nationalism and of "the woman question" (for example, Bhattacharjee 1992; Das Dasgupta and Dasgupta 1996).

## Appropriating Hip-Hop: Masculinity, Racialization, and Subcultural Capital

Images of heterosexuality and style for Indian American men, however, are not used to index issues of ethnic authenticity as much as they are for women. This Desi subculture allows for the production of a particular masculinity that mediates the tensions of racial positioning and class aspirations for second-generation youth; it does this by drawing on both the local codes of "hipness" in urban youth culture and the immigrant mythologies of class mobility that rationalize the immigrant family and community's displacement. Dharmesh, a young man whose family lived in New Jersey, remarked that Indian American youth who grew up with Blacks and Latinos, and even some who did not, often acquire "the style, and the attitude, and the walk" of hip-hop-affiliated youth on coming to college.

Hip-hop is not just "the Black CNN," to use Chuck D's famous phrase, but has become the channel for youth-culture information in general, not just nationally but also globally. As Peter Christenson and Donald Roberts have pointed out: "Of all the current popular music styles, the rap/hip-hop culture most defines the pop-cultural cutting edge, thus providing adolescents concerned with "coolness" and peer status much crucial information on subjects such as the latest slang and the most recent trends in dance and fashion" (1998, 111). The music and media industries have helped make hip-hop a language increasingly adopted by middle-class and suburban youth (Giroux 1996; Kleinfeld 2000; Roediger 1998), with White consumers accounting for about 75 percent of rap album sales, according to one estimate (Lusane 1992, cited in Christenson & Roberts 1998, 111). Hip-hop culture is resignified by Indian American "homeboys" when it crosses class boundaries. As Sujata, a

woman who grew up in suburban Connecticut, pointed out: "A lot of them are like total prep school, but they put on a, like, it's this preppie boy–urban look, you know, it's like Upper East Side homeboy, you know. Huge pants, and then, like, a nice button-down shirt, you know."

There are various positions taken by cultural critics on the deeply contested issue of consuming cultural commodities across racial, ethnic, and class lines. Perry Hall offers a trenchant critique of the historical appropriation of Black popular music in the United States, arguing, "A complex love-hate relationship connects mainstream society and African American culture—in which White America seems to love the melody and rhythm of Black folks' souls while rejecting their despised Black faces" (1997, 31). Hall views this ambivalence, arising from racialized structures of power and difference, as an underlying current in the simultaneous denial of, and attraction to, appealing forms of Black musical culture. The appropriation and diffusion of ragtime, jazz, rhythm and blues, disco, and rap at different moments have been marked by cycles of innovation of Black musical forms, suppression and aesthetic rejection by the mainstream, followed by co-optation by White artists, absorption into the mainstream, and, in some cases, rejuvenation by contact with dominant cultural forms" (Hall 1997). David Roediger (1998, 361–362), in his writing on the controversial term *wiggers*, or *White niggers* (youth who identify in various ways with Black culture), observes that:

> the proliferation of *wiggers* illuminates issues vital to the history of what Albert Murray has called the "incontestably mulatto" culture of the United States. The dynamics of cultural hybridity have long featured much that is deeply problematic on the White side. From minstrelsy through *Black Like Me*, from the Black-faced antebellum mobs that victimized African Americans to the recent film *Soul Man*, the superficial notion that Blackness could be put on and taken off at will has hounded hybridity.

The question of hybridity is doubly complicated for Desi youth in New York, for not only are they reworking hip-hop into their own youth culture but into a *remix* youth culture, one that expresses the cultural imaginaries of second-generation youth from an immigrant community of color. Desi youth turn to hip-hop, most fundamentally, because it is key to marking their belonging in the multiethnic, urban landscape of New York City. Sharmila, a young woman who had been involved in organizing parties through her campus student organization, noted that for many second-generation men, hip-hop style connotes a certain image of racialized hypermasculinity that is the ultimate definition of "cool": "South Asian guys give more respect to African Americans than to Whites because they think the style is cool. The guys look up to them because it's down [fashionable]. They think, 'I'm kinda scared of

them, but I want to look like them because they're cool.'" Black style is viewed as the embodiment of a particular machismo, the object of racialized desire and, simultaneously, of racialized fear. Ravi, who began going to Desi parties while in high school in California and has continued to do so in New York, reflected, "The hip-hop culture has just really taken off. It's really appealed to the Indians, maybe just listening pleasure, the way it sounds, I guess. Maybe the toughness it exudes." Roediger points out that "in a society in which the imagination of Blackness so thoroughly frames what both attracts and repulses Whites," American male youth often "identify with violence, scatology, and sexism in rap rather than with Black music and culture more broadly" (1998: 359, 361).

Some may argue that Indian American men are drawn to symbols of "tough" masculinity to counter the popular construction of South Asian, and more generally Asian American, men as somehow emasculated. Oliver Wang, in his work on (East and Southeast) Asian American hip-hop artists, has argued that "Asian Americans use hip-hop as a space to reshape their own self-image, to lay claim to a long-denied masculine and sexual character, and to challenge racially gendered stereotypes, . . . from sexually perverse and predatory opium addicts at the turn of the century to present-day caricatures devoid of masculinity and sexuality" (Wang 1997, 6–7; see also Wang 2007). Yet very few of the young men I spoke to felt strongly about mainstream representations of Desi men as emasculated; while some did speak of being pegged as model students in school, they did not—at least consciously—connect this to the lure of hip-hop. Rather, Sunil, a member of an Indian American fraternity, was concerned about class-coded images of Indian American men as "convenience-store owners" or innately nerdy students. Sunil traced these images to the two major waves of post-1965 Indian immigration to the United States: "Like toward the lower-middle class, they say, 'You're the shopkeeper,' the upper middle class, they'd say, 'Oh, you're this intellectual.'" The fact that the critique of emasculation did not explicitly resonate with these Indian American men does not mean that they were unconcerned with the particular overtones of masculinity that are available to them through hip-hop. However, this line of argument brings to light the ways in which "the authentic Black subject in hip-hop" is rendered hypermasculine in the context of wider racist constructions of Black and Latino men as hypersexual or macho and Asian American men as historically emasculated (Wang 1997, 14–15, 17).[6] Listening to what these Indian American men have to say, it is apparent that it is also the powerful appeal of hip-hop music and youth style, not to mention the sheer pleasure of the music, that draws them to hip-hop, as is the case perhaps for many other American youth and youth worldwide (Kelley 1997; Rose 1994a; Wang 2007)—the resonance is "rhythmic" and not just "symbolic" (Christenson and Roberts 1998, 111).

Sharmila, however, thought that the "bad boy" image for Indian American men that presumably resonates with hip-hop had only short-term appeal for women:

> Because the whole 'hood culture has entered Indians so much, a lot of girls are attracted to that. But that's . . . a lot of times it's temporary; when they think about long-term, they want something stable, or they'll push their boyfriend to be more stable. . . . But in the beginning girls are always attracted to the kind that are like more dangerous and more mysterious.

Sharmila's observation hints at the underlying racialization of this "mysterious" Black-identified masculinity as excitingly Other. This masculinity is sexy, at least while youth are immersed in this subculture in their college years, because it is read as contradicting the "stability" that women presumably find attractive later in adulthood and in the lives they imagine in the future. This desirable stability, for Sharmila, is defined in terms of psychological maturity as well as financial security, as typified in the "stable" image of a "doctor," portraying women as deriving satisfaction from men's social and economic capital. Second-generation men were very concerned with the class ideal of masculinity held up for them by their families, more so than the women who presumably desire this in a partner. Vijay said, "[To be] financially [successful is] very important; professionally, very important. You can't date, like, a grunge figure or anything like that. He might be exceptional, but [if] he doesn't dress well, that sort of stuff matters a lot. I mean, basically, if he's a lawyer, investment banker sort of thing, right, fine." Yet, interestingly, none of the women I spoke to said that the traditional breadwinner role is what they desired in a partner themselves; on the contrary, several were explicit in noting that they wanted an egalitarian heterosexual relationship.

It is clear, given the contradictions between what these young people say is desirable in a partner and what they want themselves, that this idealized masculinity does not emerge solely from within this youth subculture but from the class aspirations and material concerns of families and communities. The desire for class reproduction or upward mobility is infused into the masculinity that is the ideal for Indian American men that everyone supposedly wants but about which several youth are deeply ambivalent. A "hoody" image, connoting a dangerous, hypersexual masculinity, becomes a counterpoint to White-collar stability, suggesting that Indian American youth are not immune from the wider racialized stereotypes of Black and Latino men as oversexed and underachieving. This "mysterious" masculinity is still portrayed as only a short-term alternative, a temporary spurt of macho play with Other images, but there seems to be some degree of resistance to, or at least ambivalence about, the White-collar masculinity that awaits Indian American men. Homeboys may be sexy and exciting, but can White-collar masculinity be desirable?

An upward mobility that will increase the economic and social capital of an immigrant community depends in part on the assurance not only that the next generation will move into well-paying professions but also that they will marry and reproduce the heterosexual family structure. The transition from college to the workforce involves structural factors, as noted by sociologists concerned with predictions of second-generation class mobility (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1998), but also a *willingness* to participate in this class mobility, a subjectivity that is deeply gendered and sexualized and often worked out through struggles over what it mean to be "cool" or "authentic" as a second-generation Asian American. Remix youth culture becomes a space in which the anticipation of heterosexual relationships between second-generation Indian Americans and the reproduction of the family and community's boundaries is held in tension with fantasies about what a life outside of a "near-White" middle-class trajectory would be like. Black masculinity and fears of economic instability become a counterpoint to the "traditional" heterosexual family structure and desire for upward mobility that are linked to a nostalgia recalling an imaginary past, yet focused on its fulfillment in an imagined future.

## The Music Industry and Moral Projects

The Desi party scene is also a space that is used as a source of part-time, or sometimes even full-time, income by deejays and party promoters who are young entrepreneurs savvy to the economics of popular culture. Robin Kelley points out that it is important to consider the ways in which youth may be at "work" while they are presumably at "play," for the divide between "leisure" and "labor" has been blurred by the commodification of youth culture and the entrepreneurial activity of youth who put "culture to work" for them as a source of income (Kelley 1997). As in other dance cultures dominated by men at the turntables, this was tied to the emergence of deejaying in the 1980s as a source of employment for young men of color and the larger mainstreaming of dance culture and of hip-hop, in particular. The culture industry increasingly turned to "urban" youth style, commodifying and marketing "street trends" in music or fashion developed by marginalized youth of color who remained underemployed and whose "deviant" lifestyles as presumably unproductive citizens contributed to the mass appeal of symbols of those same lives. As performance artist Danny Hoch astutely observed in *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip Hop,* commenting on the appropriation of Black youth style by the White-dominated culture industry: "I can take your culture from you, soup it up, and sell it/back to you. . . . So keep buyin' this fly revolution that I'm sellin'.

. . . And I'll keep buyin' time with the cash that you spend./We could hang out./I'll even call you my friend" (1998, 4).

It was also striking, especially at the time, that men dominated the turntables despite the presence of DJ Rekha and a few other less well-known women deejays in New York, reflecting the larger patterns in the music industry. The ways musical knowledge and technology are shared and developed reinforce the homosocial bonds of generally masculinist subcultures (for example, see Straw 1997; Whiteley 1997: xviii). There are other points of tension in this subculture industry that highlight the contradictions of race, gender, and capital. Many of the Indian remix albums that sampled rap lyrics were bootleg albums that did not respect copyright laws, an issue that concerned musicians at that moment in the industry, even though hip-hop has always been a hybrid form based on the sampling of sounds and words. As bhangra and Indian-film remixes moved into the mainstream and Indian deejays considered the possibility of signing on to major record labels, as the British Asian artist Bally Sagoo did with Sony, there was greater pressure to legalize this appropriation, but this did not translate into equitable acknowledgment or economic payback for hip-hop artists, especially given the White-dominated ownership of the music industry (Feld 1988; Hall 1997).

One way of rethinking the debates about "cultural appropriation" that holds in tension these material and ideological forces has been offered by Daniel Miller (1995), who analyzes consumption as a "moral project," for commodities offer possibilities to reimagine cultural ideologies, such as those of "self" and "other." Miller observes: "Consumption is simply a process of objectification—that is, a use of goods and services in which the object or activity becomes simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings in the world" (1995: 30). This draws on the classic Marxist notion of reification through commodity fetishism: the relations between people become embodied in the relations between commodities (Žižek 1989: 31). Žižek pointed out that human subjects often recognize, in theory, that social relationships underlie the relations between material objects, such as money, but in practice they act as if things have inherent properties; it is "in practice, not theory," he argues, that they are commodity fetishists (31). This formulation is not always true, however, for there are clearly situations in which the social relationships underlying consumption are indeed obscured or other contexts in which the line between "practice" and "theory" is more blurred, as subjects remain self-conscious about the social and political meanings of their acts of consumption. However, it is indeed important to acknowledge that participants in this remix subculture often explicitly recognize that their use of commodities, such as music and style, are linked to larger discourses of cultural nostalgia or racialized notions of hipness that are laced with a politics of desire that has many objects.

The dual discourses of authenticity operating in remix youth culture, the authenticity of subcultural cool and that of collective nostalgia, are embedded in each other and sometimes reinforce but also contradict each other, as their "moral projects" lead youth to different understandings of how to be "Indian" at this particular moment in New York. There is no "authentic" reading of the consumption of hip-hop by Desi youth, but there is indeed a politics of authenticity shaping the lives of these youth at this particular moment in New York City and that is constantly being negotiated with references to their positionings in a larger Indian diaspora and to global flows of culture. The globalization of mass media in the era of late capitalism has resulted in the seeping of Black-identified American popular culture and fashion into remote corners of the world, at huge profits to American and multinational corporations (Skoggard 1998). Indian youth living in rural areas can now listen to American rap or Indian remixes from the United States, and children of the transnational elite in India wear Nike shoes that are manufactured in sweatshops in East and Southeast Asia (LaFeber 1999). Through the consumption of music and style and the performance of remixed dance movements, Desi youth participate in a vision of "authentic locality" that positions them as Indian Americans but also New Yorkers, constructing a sense of belonging to a diasporic community that is embedded in the material context of immigration.

## The Racial Politics of "Cool"

Codes of hip(hop)ness at work in Asian American youth subcultures are always engaged in some way with the racialization of Asians and the Black-White racial paradigm of the United States, issues that are layered with the questions of gender, class, and cultural authenticity. The meanings of this appropriation of Black style obviously have different implications for youth depending on the particular racial and class locations they occupy. Dorinne Kondo (1995: 53), commenting on urban Asian Americans who identify with African Americans and borrow their dialect, observes that this phenomenon reflects "the persistence of the Black-White binary in the dominant imagery and the in-the-middle position of Asian Americans and Latinos on that unidimensional hierarchy. If you are Asian American or Latino, especially on the East Coast, White and Black are the poles, and if you don't identify with one, you identify with the other." Gary Okihiro (1994) probes more deeply into the positioning of Asian Americans within this racial binary by addressing the political implications of the question, "Is yellow Black or White?" Or, if you will, is Brown Black or White? Okihiro (1994, 34) notes that Asian Americans, Na-

tive Americans, and Latinos are classified as either "near Whites" or "just like Blacks" depending on the operation of model-minority myths or their subordination as minorities:

> Asian Americans have served the master class, whether as "near Blacks" in the past or as "near Whites" in the present or as "marginal men" in both the past and the present. Yellow [or Brown] is emphatically neither White nor Black; but insofar as Asians and Africans share a subordinate position to the master class, yellow is a shade of Black, and Black a shade of yellow.

Okihiro concludes that the question, as posed, is a false proposition because it reinscribes the bipolar racial framework of the United States, disciplining ethnic minorities and erasing histories of alliances (62). Yet like the very notion of racial formation, racial polarity is a system of representation that still plays a role in shaping social structures and individual experiences (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). The turn to hip-hop by Desi youth in New York is a "racial project," in Michael Omi and Howard Winant's sense of the term: an ideological link between structures and representations of race, connecting "what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning" (1994, 56).

This racial project can be seen as a response to the Black-White racial binary and the attempts of second-generation Indian Americans to position themselves in relation to the monochromatic racial boundaries of the United States. In this sense, the work of hip-hop for Indian Americans is similar to the use of images of Blacks in Japanese mass culture, which John Russell links to a "tendency to employ the Black Other as a reflexive symbol through which Japanese attempt to deal with their own ambiguous racial status in a Eurocentric world, where such hierarchies have been largely (and literally) conceived in terms of polarizations between Black and White and in which Japanese as Asians have traditionally occupied a liminal state" (1992: 299). Russell identifies two reflexive uses of the Black Other: one is to accept the "racial status quo" but to compensate for this inferior status of Japanese/Asians by asserting superiority over the supposedly "backward" group, internalizing racist models from "the West"; the second strategy is to "reject the status quo" and assert solidarity with other non-Whites (pp. 306–307). Joe Wood's brilliant ethnographic essay "The Yellow Negro" points out that Japanese "Blackfacers, b-boys, and girls who darken their skin with ultraviolet rays" are eager to "embrace Black people" and hang out at parties with African American soldiers and African immigrants (1998, 43). The racial strategies identified by Russell mirror the findings of Nitasha Sharma's (1998) study of Indian American youth at the University of Santa Barbara, California, where she found that

there were generally two kinds of hip-hop fans. One group accepted the notion that Indian Americans occupied a mediating position in the Black-White racial hierarchy and tended to be interested in rap primarily for its beats, rather than the content of its lyrics. The second group viewed hip-hop as a social movement critical of the racial status quo and identified with other youth of color, distancing themselves from, or feeling marginalized within, Indian American communities.

The Indian American youth I spoke to in New York City demonstrated both kinds of strategic identifications, but they were not as clear-cut as the ones Russell or Sharma outline; rather, they seemed to be partial and conjunctural responses and closer to the situational, often ambiguous racial identifications Wood described. In some instances, as I will show, they seemed to show an acceptance, or more of a passive nonrejection, of the racial status quo, but in other contexts, they explicitly identified as non-White and resisted anti-Black racism. What makes these responses complex and contingent is that the particular youth culture I am discussing here is not based only on hip-hop but is an Indian remix youth culture that samples hip-hop and, therefore, also an overt expression of ethnicity. The emphasis on an ethnic identity in response to racial ambiguity is perhaps a third reflexive strategy, or more plausibly one that contains within it some degree of distancing from, or solidarity with Blacks, or both.[7]

## Ethnicizing Moves

The discourse of ethnic identity, according to some youth as well as scholarly commentators, is a way to resolve, or perhaps deflect, the question of racial positioning for Indian Americans as it is for certain other second-generation groups, including Black West Indian youth in New York (Waters 1999). Chandrika, who was actively involved with Asian American student activism on her campus, commented, "No matter what it is, if you haven't been accepted, you're not going to be Black, like all your friends, or White, like all your friends; it's not going to happen. You seek refuge." Most of the second-generation Indian American youth I spoke to had not been drawn to articulations of Indian American-ness until they arrived at college and found a sizable community of ethnic peers and a racially segregated campus social life, created in the context of the ethnic student organizations and multicultural politics that organize social life on United States college campuses. Chandrika thought this explained why some of her peers began flaunting Indian symbols of dress and jewelry and literally performing their ethnic identity with "bhangra moves" on the dance floor, using these symbolic markers to assert their ethnic identity.

These ethnicizing moves reflect broader patterns of emphasizing ethnicity by certain segments of the Indian American community, which are viewed by critics as attempts to position Indian Americans outside the racial stratification of the United States and deflect identification with less privileged minority groups of color (George 1997; Mazumdar 1989; Visweswaran 1997). Kamala Visweswaran suggests that these tactical evasions have historical precedents in the early twentieth century when Indian immigrants, and other Asian Americans, were contesting their sometimes ambiguous racial classifications in order to become naturalized as U.S. citizens, then defined as "free White people" and persons of "African nativity or descent" (Jensen 1988, 247).[8] In a landmark case in 1923, the Supreme Court rejected the petition of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant, claiming that although Indians were technically Caucasian, the definition of race had to be based on the "understanding of the common man." Visweswaran argues that by not "challenging the racial basis of the exclusion laws," Thind and other South Asian immigrants "actively disavowed racial identification with other Asian (and non-White) groups in order to be counted as "White," while after 1965, Indian immigrant organizations lobbied to be classified as "Asian," and hence as a minority, in order to receive affirmative-action benefits (21).[9] The political implications of Thind's move are not completely straightforward, given the anti-Asian racism enshrined in immigration and naturalization law during this period of exclusion of Asians from the United States; as a result of the Thind decision, Indians were legally barred from acquiring citizenship and this case became the basis of antimiscegenation laws, exclusion from immigration quotas, and denial of land ownership in California (Daniels 1989; Takaki 1989).

Late twentieth-century notions of racial and cultural citizenship in public discourse and the media were somewhat different for Asian Americans, if still revealing suspicions of Asians as aliens or potential traitors (Palumbo-Liu 1999: 5), and especially so for anyone identified as "Muslim" or "Middle Eastern" after September 11, 2001. Second-generation performances of ethnicity are motivated by needs that are perhaps more complex than a simple evasion of racial classification but that are deeply shaped by multiculturalist constructions of national belonging that have prevailed on college campuses since the 1980s and 1990s. Since the emergence of the Asian American movement in the civil-rights era, the category of "Asian American" is a racial project available to Indian Americans as a panethnic identification, at least theoretically, given the complex relationship many Indian and South Asian Americans have to the pan-Asian umbrella (see Shankar and Srikanth 1998; also Davé et al. 2000).

The question is, of course, whether Desi youth can build a critical racial politics that would allow them to participate in spheres based on alliances

with youth of color and whether they can resist the ethnic chauvinism of South Asian student organizations that view other group allegiances with suspicion. Chandrika observed that Indian American students who participated in the remix subculture at Columbia did not unite with African American and Latino students in the coalition of students of color that had been battling the university administration for adequate representation in the curriculum. By contrast, students belonging to the South Asian student organization on campus were less politicized, in her opinion, and more interested in organizing events largely to promote "cultural awareness," as I have found to be the case at other college campuses across the United States. While there are small groups of youth within most of these South Asian student organizations in New York, and elsewhere, who are more politicized and interested in building alliances with other minority student groups, what most of these South Asian student organizations seem to share is an emphasis on performing a strictly cultural Indian/South Asian American identity in an exclusively Indian/South Asian American social space. The larger backdrop for second-generation youth who are involved in this Desi youth subculture is one in which identification as Indian American has generally not been a political stance, let alone a position of solidarity with other youth of color.

Remix youth culture's sampling of hip-hop allows Desi youth to hold the two impulses, of ethnicization and also of participation in the U.S. racial formation, in a somewhat delicate balance; as a racial project, it seems to defer the question of "Black or White" through the ambiguity of adopting Black style in an ethnically exclusive space. Black style travels more freely across racial and class borders than young Black men do. Commenting on discussions of "keeping it real" in hip-hop, Andrew Ross (1994, 287) notes the cruel irony that the "authentic" group—young Black males—is itself vanishing, under attack from and incarcerated by the state. If the production of cool symbolically crosses racial boundaries, it is still for some youth only a transitional flirtation with Black popular culture and one that has become, for many, an American rite of passage in adolescence (Roediger 1998).

However, Jeffrey Melnick (1996: 227) observes that the crossing of racial boundaries through music tends to wane as adolescents move into adulthood and is "temporally bounded by the fact that . . . teenagers have to grow up into a labor economy deeply invested in racial division." Sunita reflected that, in her view, many Desi youth immersed in hip-hop culture "at the back of their minds are thinking, 'This is not long-term.'" She commented that the appropriation of what is perceived by the mainstream to be an oppositional style is mediated by the often unstated, but always present, location of class status and remarked, "I know for me there's this cushion; my parents are supporting me,

they're paying for my college. . . . You know [the identification] is only up to a certain point, there are big, distinct differences." In New York, many of the college students I spoke to seemed to envision a future in which they would move into the professional, college-educated class, in order to realize their immigrant parents' aspirations for upward mobility.

Unlike the creators of hip-hop, most Indian American youth I spoke to did not view this remix popular culture as resistance to a system of economic and racial stratification; in fact, several seemed bent on succeeding within that system. Although they were aware that as youth of color they are often targets of racial discrimination, many did not believe that would translate into economic discrimination in their own lives. However, second-generation youth who grew up in less-affluent, racially diverse neighborhoods often know what it is like to live in communities struggling for city and state resources, and, regardless of class location, many of these youth had experienced racial harassment and were sometimes mistakenly identified as Black or Latino (George 1997). The post–9/11 context has exacerbated these class differences in experiences of racial profiling, and also religious cleavages in particular, as Muslims as well as Sikhs have predominantly borne the brunt of homeland-security paranoia, anti-Muslim hysteria, and Orientalist suspicion. My recent research on South Asian Muslim youth after 9/11 suggests that some Muslim American youth understood the "Blackening" of their identities in relation to the historical exclusion of African Americans (and other racial minorities, as well as violence against Native Americans) and a deeper identification with other urban youth of color (Maira 2004, forthcoming).

## Generational Alienation and Ethnic Anxiety

The emulation of urban African American style by Desi youth has more subtle implications if situated in differentials of privilege and generational divides over racial politics. There are some youth for whom the turn to hip-hop is clearly related to a rejection of the racial hierarchies of dominant U.S. racial formations, and of their own families, and for a few, the interest in hip-hop grew out of friendships and intimate relationships with other youth of color. Sunita pointed out that the adoption of hip-hop sometimes becomes a gesture of defiance against parents, such as her own, who belong to the wave of Indian immigrants who came to the United States in the mid-1960s and 1970s and were highly educated professionals and graduate students. Manisha, who has dated Black and Latino men since she was in high school, said that there are Indian immigrants who don't want their children listening to "that music": "I think because it's definitely associated with Black . . . people. And I definitely

know that there's *big* racist views in the community, and they don't like . . . the fact that a lot of Indian kids are heading towards that, the hip-hop scene, which is mostly the Black and Latino scene." Manisha has an astute materialist analysis of the ways in which the racial and political alignments of affluent Indian Americans are read by other people of color. In response to an African American student in her class who had "heard that Indians are like the Hindu Whites," and ignoring the conflation of religion with nationality for the moment, she observed:

> I said the basic reason I think that we're associated like that is because most of them that come over here came with an education, and we got wealthy pretty quick even though we were poor when we came over—we right away got wealthy, we moved into the White neighborhoods, and that scattered us; . . . we assimilated quicker in a sense.

Manisha was very critical of the racism she had witnessed toward youth of color in her high school, and against people of color in general. Referring to the Thind decision, she concluded that she could not understand how an Indian American might "feel like the Hindu White . . . because it is [based on] like the definition of what the common man would see now, and that's not us, you know."

For several lower-middle-class as well as upper-middle-class youth, identification with African Americans is often fraught with conflicts with immigrant parents on issues of race politics. Perhaps the most emotional critique of the anti-Black prejudices of immigrant parents was expressed by women who had dated African American men and struggled with parental disapproval. One of them, Purnima, spoke of the anger and frustration she felt on hearing her mother, and her Indian relatives, say, "You can't bring a *kallu* [darkie] home"; she eventually ended the relationship with her Black boyfriend but said that she was unable to forgive her mother for her racial prejudices and that the family was "torn apart." The anti-Black prejudices of South Asian immigrants are reinforced by the Black-White lines of American racial formations and the historical scapegoating of African Americans by new immigrants (Kondo 1995; Mazumdar 1989; Morrison 1994; Prashad 2000; Singh 1996). As Toni Morrison writes in her incisive essay "On the backs of Blacks" (1994, 98):

> Although U.S. history is awash in labor battles, political fights, and property wars among all religious and ethnic groups, their struggles are persistently framed as struggles between recent arrivals and Blacks. In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American Blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his [or her] nemesis is understood to be African American.

Second-generation youth who participate in this youth culture are not unaware of the contradictions of consuming Black style and are often uneasy about the politics of this "cultural appropriation" in light of anti-Black racism. This paradox was clearly articulated by DJ Baby Face at an Indian party held in the cavernous tunnels of a Manhattan club, with the beat of Indian remix pounding against the walls: "Blacks are the scapegoat for Indians, but when it comes to fashion and style, we hold them high; they have power." His succinct observation reveals the underlying politics of being "cool"—the group emulated in style is also the one on whose back immigrants tread to preserve their sense of superior status.

For Indian immigrants, this racialized entry into the United States defined in relationship to African Americans is further complicated because they leave one color-conscious society with a history of caste stratification for another (Mazumdar, 1989). However, in *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000), Vijay Prashad cautions against an easy acceptance of the "thesis that Desis have a racist tradition that can be seen in the mysteries of the caste complex," pointing to radical South Asian traditions of solidarity with Black liberation that have been have been articulated by the likes of Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz—and that have largely been erased in the diaspora. Prashad argues that many Indian, and South Asian, immigrants accept anti-Black racism as part of the "conservative Desi culture that is being created in the U.S." (2000: 175–77) in their need to belong to a diasporic community that will bolster their sometimes fragile foothold in a new country. This does not make any less problematic their anti-Black racism in the context of longer historical encounters with European colonialism, nor does it make any less marginal the politics of racial solidarity within the Indian immigrant community.

Manisha, for example, points out that immigrant parents view the identification with hip-hop among Desi youth through the framework of an assimilationist "moral project" that constructs White America as the preferred destination for their children, refusing to acknowledge that hip-hop is an integral part of White American youth culture as well. Manisha's observation echoes the views of those who argue that, for the most part, the Indian immigrant elite strives to ally itself with "White middle-class America" (Helweg and Helweg 1990; Hossain 1982). Amritjit Singh notes that some affluent Indian immigrants complain, as did an acquaintance of his, that "if middle-class people like us are paying unusually high taxes, it is only because of 'all those Blacks on welfare'; that Blacks do not want to work or work hard; that Blacks have contributed "brawn" but no "brain" to the development of this country" (1996: 99). This rhetoric of anti-Black racism among Indian Americans reached its most publicized extreme in the writings of the infamous author of *The End of Racism*, Dinesh D'Souza, who resurrected the specter of the model

minority as a "weapon against African Americans" with his question: "Why can't an African American be more like an Asian?" (cited in Prashad, 2000: 4). Yet the hardening of racist beliefs tied to the model-minority myth among Indian immigrants in the United States is violently jolted by incidents of racial assaults on Indians, disrupting the denial of their presence as people of color in this country (Mazumdar, 1989). In the aftermath of the Dotbusters attacks on South Asian immigrants in Jersey City in 1987, it was a group of young South Asian American activists who mobilized to bring justice against the perpetrators of the attack and formed one of the first community-based, progressive South Asian youth organizations in New York, Youth Against Racism (Misir 1996).

After 9/11, the anti-Muslim backlash included hundreds of hate crimes against South Asian Americans, including two murders, as well as incidents of racial profiling at airports and workplaces that affected South Asian American professionals who had previously thought themselves immune to racism. Yet while the racial fault lines in this country were realigned along the (ambiguously defined) polarities of Muslim/non-Muslim and Arab/non-Arab, it was not clear whether this racial profiling had really shaken the model-minority beliefs of affluent South Asian immigrants or whether most remained in a state of denial, defensive patriotism, and distancing from the "real" targets of the War on Terrorism. Yet it was also apparent from the efforts of second-generation-led civil-rights and activist organizations to respond to the crisis in South Asian and Muslim communities and to build solidarity with Arab and Middle Eastern communities that there is, to some extent, a generational difference in the political responses to the post–9/11 crisis among South Asian Americans, or at least a difference that highlights preexisting fissures of class, religion, and racial politics that manifest themselves in intergenerational tensions. My own research on working-class South Asian immigrant youth suggests that some Muslim youth, in particular those in urban multiethnic communities, increasingly identified with African American youth; whether more privileged youth are making this connection remains to be seen (Maira 2004, forthcoming).

Some argue that the turn to hip-hop among Desi youth is explained in part by the alienation of second-generation youth from the model-minority leanings of their parents, including its manifestations as anti-Black racism. Singh (1996: 98) is hopeful that second-generation youth have been socialized into a different kind of race politics, mediated through Black popular music; he writes:

> Unlike their parents, they have African American friends and have developed a better understanding of how racism and poverty operate in American society. . . . Maybe the deep sense of "alienation" expressed in contemporary Black music

> resonates with their own sense of rebellion against their parents' double standards: an insistence on seeing African Americans harshly through the prism of caste even as they cloak themselves in the highest ideals of fairness and equal opportunity.

This political and racial awareness of race politics was expressed by some of the youth I spoke to and was based on friendships and everyday social interactions, as in the case of Manisha, and on a critique of race politics, as articulated by Chandrika, Sunita, and others. Yet it is important to distinguish between an "alienation" felt by youth who are politically or economically disenfranchised or critical of the status quo—a "structural alienation"—and a resistance arising out of a generational difference, or a "social-psychological alienation" (Epstein 1998: 5–6). Adolescent rebellion against parents, and the generational ideologies they represent, is a common trope that has long been embedded in notions of adolescence and coming-of-age narratives in the United States, even while these have always varied by gender, ethnic, and class location (Erikson 1968). Rebellion through popular music, moreover, is a familiar rite of youth culture—often a particularly masculinized one (Whitely 1997)—that offers many youth a cultural form to express their distancing from parents. However, for some Indian American youth there seems to be a convergence between both forms of alienation; a style that subverts their parents' expectations and racial prejudices may also be an expression of their own critique of the racialized caste stratification of U.S. society.

## Conclusion

The turn to hip-hop by Desi youth in the 1990s is rooted in larger histories of appropriating Black music by non–African Americans as part of the reinvention of ethnic identity by various groups. George Lipsitz (1994b), commenting on White American artists who were drawn to African American and Latino musical traditions, writes:

> Black music provided them with a powerful critique of mainstream middle-class Anglo-Saxon America as well as with an elaborate vocabulary for airing feelings of marginality and contestation. They engaged in what film critics Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan call "discursive transcoding"—indirect expression of alienations too threatening to express directly. (Kellner & Ryan 1988, cited in Lipsitz, 1994b: 55)

The turn to hip-hop in Indian American youth culture is not always based on clearly articulated political dissent or moral outrage, but it may at least provide a discourse for coding an alienation from parents that is bound up with

struggles over what it means to be Indian in the United States. Their alienation is not simply a rejection of their parents' racial ideologies but also perhaps expresses ambivalence toward the upwardly mobile path that their parents have attempted to carve out for them, with its burden of suitable educational fields and careers. These and other hidden injuries of class are perhaps indirectly expressed, using Lipsitz's argument, through cultural alignments with a subculture that symbolically represents a different trajectory through America. Adolescent rebellions against middle-class parents through "representations of lower-class affiliation" are threatening precisely because they challenge not just their parents' class values but their investments in class reproduction (Ortner 1991: 171, 177). This analysis echoes the Birmingham school's theory of youth subcultures, but it, too, does not presume that the appropriation of Black popular culture is an intervention with lasting social or material impact.[10] Neither do I want to offer a functionalist reading of class alienation from the "parent culture"; rather, as suggested by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's (1986: 19) analysis of carnival, I see hip-hop's insertion into Indian American youth culture as but "one instance of a general economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure." The politics of sex, style, and mobility of Desi b-boys and "bass girls," who challenge cultural and moral codes through their sonic affiliations, raise important questions about the racial imaginaries, strategic alliances, and coded ambivalences embedded in youth culture, questions that are only more urgent in the post–9/11 context of wartime America.

## Epilogue

In the post–9/11 moment of violence against Muslim, South Asian, and Arab Americans, a rejuvenated U.S. nationalism has become multiracial, absorbing as well as dividing communities of color. Yet it is also true that while racial profiling has expanded its targets, traditional forms of racism and class hierarchies persist. Furthermore, the historical ambiguity in the racial classification of South Asians and Arabs in the United States has collided with the deeply political profiling of Muslims in relation to the War on Terror that cannot be subsumed by a domestic framework of race and ethnicity but has to be understood also in the context of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and South Asia. The question of what this will mean for a generation of South Asian American youth coming of age in this climate, and for their relations with other youth of color, remains to be answered. There are possibilities for new or renewed affinities and alliances, but there is also the danger of division

and denial. Youth culture remains an important site to explore these resonances and ambiguities. It also has something to teach us. STORM (Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement), a Bay Area hip-hop activist organization, issued a manifesto in response to the events of 9/11 that is as relevant today as it was in 2001:

1. Oppose terrorism. . . .
2. Oppose the narrowing or elimination of the people's democratic rights. . . .
3. Rely on global justice to deter future attacks: . . . Increasingly, safety at home will require justice abroad. Intensified police crackdowns at home and military savagery abroad are not the answer; the answer is justice. We must not allow the United States to respond with bombs for Third World people and continued support for repressive dictatorships and rapacious corporations. . . .
4. Oppose racist, anti-Arab bigotry: . . . We cannot allow U.S. racism to blind our minds or cloud our hearts. . . . All people—and especially African Americans, Asian/Pacific Americans, Latinas/os and Native Americans—must stand in solidarity with our Arab and Muslims brothers and sisters. (cited in Chang 2001–2002: 170–71)

## Notes

1. I use the label *Indian American* where appropriate throughout to signal this specificity, unless referring to something that is indeed pan–South Asian.

2. It is also true that an Orientalist fetishization of "Middle Eastern" culture occurs even after 2001—for example, the mainstream popularization of belly dancing among White American women, which has become a site for domesticating "Middle Eastern" traditions and negotiating ambivalent views of Muslim and Middle Eastern feminities and masculinities (Sunaina Maira, "Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalism, and U.S. Empire," *American Quarterly*, June 2008).

3. This is important to distinguish from "Asian American hip-hop." Key Kool, a Japanese American hip-hop artist, argued that rather than speaking of Asian American hip-hop, which implies that hip-hop is ethnic-specific, he preferred to speak of Asian Americans in hip-hop, a common language and youth movement. Comment at panel, "Asian American Hip-Hop," FrEe ZoNe: Symposium on Asian/Pacific/American Youth Culture, New York University, April 8, 2000. For other examples of Asian American musicians in hip-hop taking similar positions, see Wang (1997).

4. Nearly all the deejays I met or heard about at the time were Indian American, a point that deserves further reflection in relation to social networks and social capital and to national and religious divisions within South Asian American communities.

5. New York had about 10 percent of the total Indian American population in the country in 1990 (Khandelwal 1995: 180). According to the 1990 census, New York City had 94,590 Indian residents of a total of 815,447 in the United States. In 2000, New

York City had 170,899 Indian residents, making it the second-largest Asian American community in the city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census).

6. In turning to hip-hop to challenge representations of Asian American masculinity, Wang points out that these rappers reinscribe a "hegemonic ideology" of "ideal masculinity and sexuality" that rests on a stereotypical notion of "the authentic Black subject in hip-hop" and that ultimately uses an "idealized White masculinity" as its normalizing frame of reference (1997, 14–15, 17).

7. An example of Asian American youth cultural production using hip-hop to resolve the perception of racial ambiguity while asserting solidarity with youth of color is the progressive zine *Native Tongh*, by the hip-hop-identified MaddBuddha, whose credo is "A yellow shade in a Black and White world."

8. In 1922, the Supreme Court decided that Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, was not Caucasian and hence inelegible for citizenship. From 1906 to 1923, the courts struggled with how to racially classify Asians and Arabs and define the ambiguous term *White*, granting naturalization rights to some Indian immigrants in opposition to the arguments of government attorneys that Indians were neither "White" nor "Caucasian." At least sixty-nine Indians were naturalized between 1908 and 1922, but definitions of their racial classification were based on amorphous and often contradictory anthropological, geographical, and popular understandings of race, reflecting the debates of the time (Jensen 1988, 255).

9. While it is important to point out that Thind and others did not attempt to overturn the fundamentally racist premise of naturalization laws at the time, the case is complicated by knowing that Thind was an open, although not militant, critic of British imperialist rule in India and, at the same time, had served in the U.S. army during World War I (Jensen 1988).

10. The politics of bhangra/remix youth culture in New York, or more generally in the United States, stands in contrast to that in Britain, where the late 1970s and early 1980s saw a "new symbolic unity primarily between African-Caribbean and Asian people" through identification with the category "Black" (Sharma 1996, 39). This coalitional identification, Sanjay Sharma notes, was a political project involving "autonomous, anti-racist community struggles in Britain." However, he also points out that the label *Black* "had a certain way of silencing the very specific experiences of Asian people" (Hall 1991, cited in Sharma 1996, 39). Bhangra remix emerged as a "new Asian dance music" that offered an Asian identity as a possible racial location, but still one that, in Sharma's view, "continues to be intimately tied to rethinking the possibilities of the Black antiracist project" (1996, 34).

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# 5

# How Hip-Hop Helped an Indian Girl Find Her Way Home

*Deepti Hajela*

I'VE GOTTEN THE LOOKS FOR SO LONG NOW, I'm used to it. Raised eyebrows, vaguely puzzled expressions, sometimes accompanied by a comment or question somewhere along the lines of "Why are *you* listening to *that*?" *That* being hip-hop. *Me* being a one-and-a-half-generation Indian American woman. The ones making the faces and comments being other South Asians (and the occasional White person.)

It just didn't make sense to some people. They wondered, Didn't I know I was *Indian*? Was I trying to be something else? Oddly enough, I've never gotten that from any of the Black people I know or am now connected to through my husband. In fact, one of my nicer recollections is of the time a friend told me how cool it was that I was appreciative of Black culture and history and yet so proudly Indian.

I am proud to be Indian. It's the cultural foundation my life is built on. But I wasn't always. And it was hip-hop that helped me get there. For a young girl who felt more than a little like an outsider in the suburb she grew up in, hip-hop was a revelation.

From the opening beats and words of Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, one of the genre's classic albums, I was hooked. That summer of 1989, I found it. Here was music that resonated in my soul; here were people who were talking about what I was feeling, people who knew what it was like to feel disconnected from the mainstream around them. And here were people who knew who they were and were damn proud of it. It was inspiring and started me down a path that led me back to my roots.

What's that? I've completely lost you? Sorry, I'll start from the beginning.

Hi, I'm Deepti. Indian American woman from New Jersey. Parents from the motherland. I was born during the last few months of a couple of years they spent in Africa. Been here in the United States since I was an infant. Raised and reared for the most part in the Garden State. (No Jersey jokes!)

Like many-a good immigrant parent, my mom and dad did their best to raise me and my older brother in a good Indian household, even in the not-Indian-at-all suburbs of Jersey. There was Indian food all the time, I always heard Hindi around me, we regularly made the trek to Pittsburgh to go to the temple there and, of course, drove to New York City to get to the closest Indian grocery store. (Which is still around, I think.)

But as it turns out, the easiest place for a good Indian household was probably *not* my little town in Northern Jersey in the 1980s. It's funny to compare to now, when the United States is a much more multicultural type of place, but back then it was *hard*, at least from my perspective.

The town I grew up in is a pretty place—tree-lined streets, some lovely homes, just nice. On a warm, sunny day, I love driving down the main street because I inevitably get one of those I'm-really-glad-to-be-alive feelings.

But diverse it was not—at least not then. I couldn't give you an exact demographic breakdown, but we were one of very few minority families of any kind in town, let alone Indian. As far as I can remember, there was one other Indian kid in my grade during the elementary school years, a boy. (And of course, when we got to the boy-girl stage, people just assumed we'd like each other. We were both Indian, weren't we? Meanwhile, I had a crush on the blond-haired, blue-eyed cutie who all the girls thought was just it. Not that he ever paid any attention to me.)

It wasn't fun being the different one. There were the questions I couldn't answer and that made me feel oh-so-bad about the culture I came from, that had seemed to make sense when I was at home: How come you don't celebrate Christmas? How can you have more than one god? The message I came away with? Deepti, what's *wrong* with you?

There were the things I just didn't know about, the bits and pieces of Americana that seemed so exotic to me. (Rainbow sprinkles? Too cool! But we never had them in the house, because, really, what would we do, put them on the gulab jamun? Although, in hindsight, that might have been yummy . . . hmm.) I was a Brownie and a Girl Scout, but it just didn't feel natural, or come as easy as it seemed to for the other girls. My shining moment was the year I had the third-highest total of Girl Scout cookie sales. Uh, I sold, like, fifty boxes. The girl who won sold something like two hundred–plus. She was completely out of my league.

I didn't like being different. It was confusing and strange, and I resented it. I resented India, too, when we visited, for its heat and sometimes lack of elec-

tricity and no decent television and let's not even talk about the toilets. And, of course, my Hindi was awful, so I couldn't understand much of anything, and I got sick *every* time we went! I remember one trip, the first night we were there, underneath the pleasure of seeing my family was the undercurrent of "ok, only XX number of days until we go home." Believe me, I kept count.

I wanted to fit in, but I just . . . didn't. (At least not in my own eyes. Who knows, maybe all the kids I went to school with thought I was the coolest thing ever. I'm guessing probably not.) I just felt I was . . . *trying*, all the time, to be like everyone else and just not getting it. I just wanted to *belong*.

Switching to private school after sixth grade didn't help much at first, especially since my father had died unexpectedly a couple of years earlier and I had to add just plain miserable to lonely and isolated.

But it was a small private school, so it was inevitable that I would start to meet people, make some friend-type connections. I was drawn to the people on the fringe: the kids who seemed all together and cool were just too much for me. I didn't know how to relate to them; they had these lives I just didn't get, all-American with the sports playing and the boy dating and all. I was *not* an athlete; I was all about the reading and the books. And dating? Please. I already knew that wouldn't fly in my Indian household even when I was older; it was hardly going to go over well when I was thirteen years old.

And the whole Indian thing still wasn't working for me, even though there were more Indian kids around. While I lived an Indian life at home—read all the religious texts and loved them, ate all the food, wore the clothes—it wasn't something I happily put out there for the rest of the world to see. It just wasn't cool.

In fact, there were times it made me cringe— like the evening we stopped at school on our way home from a party because either my brother or I had forgotten something. I was wearing an Indian outfit and remember so badly not wanting to get out of the car because the cool kids were outside the front entrance and I felt so embarrassed. Then there was the time I had some henna on my hands since we had recently attended a wedding. A fellow student, trying to be a smart ass I think, asked me if it was a disease. I wanted to die. (Should I ever run into him again, I might have to slap him. Just for old times' sake.)

That's where my head was when hip-hop came into my life, in the late 1980s, early 1990s. My older brother brought it to me. A music nut, he would go through these phases of obsessive interest in a particular genre. If I remember correctly, his trajectory went something like Top 40s, Monkees, Beatles, 1960s rock, 1970s rock, blues, hip-hop, bhangra (where he actually remains to this day).

He saw me as a convenient (and captive) audience. After all, what else are little sisters for if not listening to what he was listening to so he could point out *exactly* what he thought was so cool about it? (I still tease him now about how he used to hit repeat on a song just so he could point out one particular line or melody.)

I was a music lover as well, so I didn't really mind. To this day, any list of my favorite songs would probably include a random sampling of The Who, some Buddy Holly, maybe a little CCR.

At the time, I was listening to current mainstream stuff. I went through a whole glam-rock, heavy-metal thing, much to the horror of my mother, who couldn't stand the posters of these weird-looking musicians I had put up all over my room. (She made me close the door when guests came over so that they wouldn't have to see any of it.)

But hip-hop hit me like nothing else ever had before, or has since. From the first time I heard Chuck D's rich, powerful voice, still one of the best deliveries in all of hip-hop, I think, to the hard-driving, made-me-want-to-move beats, I was enthralled.

It was the beats that got me first, which still underpins my love for hip-hop today. There was something about it that made me want to jump out of my skin. I *loved* to dance, and here was something I could dance to, which clearly wasn't the case with the long-haired rockers who otherwise filled my music collection. (With them, it was mostly the hair flipping and head banging, which was *really* hard on my neck.)

Then there were the lyrics. Now, clearly, I'm not going to pretend that I understood everything Chuck D was talking about. I was an Indian girl in the suburbs, and I had absolutely no experience with the prison-industrial complex, the 5-0 (someone had to tell me that meant the cops), the Nation of Islam, or Joanne Chessimard (again, a reference that had to be explained.)

But there were other messages I understood loud and clear—here was someone who was sick and tired of the way the American society was treating him. Not only him, but his people. But he didn't retreat from who he was; he embraced it and encouraged others to do the same, while lambasting the mainstream for its misbegotten ways.

It was heady stuff for me. It tapped into some anger and resentment inside of myself that I don't think I knew I was even feeling. And I wasn't quite ready to express it yet either.

I didn't turn all angry-Indian-girl or anything. But I kept listening. Other hip-hop followed, from the more upbeat De La Soul to the even more hardcore N.W.A. (*Straight Outta' Compton*? A classic album. Violent? Yes. Misogynistic? Undoubtedly. Utterly pioneering? No question.)

And I did start to get somewhat mad—on the behalf of Black people and other minorities. I started to read up, books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I had already been friendly with some of the Black kids at my private school (some of whom were from far rougher neighborhoods than I grew up in), but I started to gravitate toward them even more.

Listening to hip-hop woke me up. I think my own experiences had started to make me understand the role that skin color and culture can play, but hip-hop took me out of myself, helped me realize that it was larger than just me, that there were dynamics and undercurrents in American society. Race. Gender. Class. Ethnicity.

I looked to connect with other people who shared that understanding, but they weren't the easiest to find in the environment I was in. I went to private school, after all, hardly a bastion of the underdog. It was an excellent school, one that I consider myself lucky to have attended, where I received a first-class education from teachers I think very highly of. I wouldn't hesitate to send my own children there someday.

But my classmates weren't, for the most part, people I could share my perspective with. They weren't psychotically cruel or anything like that; we got along pleasantly enough, and many of them I liked. But many of them were White, from comfortable middle-class to high-income homes. Any discussions or conversations about race that there were (and I don't remember it being much of a topic of discussion) had them taking positions I had little agreement with: racism was a thing of the past, affirmative action was evil, why can't we all just get along? Clearly, hip-hop was not on their playlists.

And forget talking about poverty. One of my best friends was a Puerto Rican boy who came to the school on scholarship in my high school years. He was amazingly brilliant but clearly had little money, as reflected by the clothes he wore. I remember him being the brunt of more than a few jokes about that, and I cringe when I think about some of the thoughtless, offhand things I said to him before I knew any better. "You don't have a telephone? Really?" He told me in later years that he had hated me at first because he thought I was as much a brainless twit as some of the other people we were around. Luckily, I learned some perspective from him and was able to redeem myself.

It was this friend and some of the other Black and Latino students I turned to for the most part. With them, I could talk about the things that frustrated me about the society we lived in. Soon enough, I started being more vocal about it in general. I'll never forget the poor teacher who had to deal with me walking into class my junior year usually ranting and raving about some historical document we'd had to read that set me off about something. Slavery, internment, Jim Crow—you name it, I was mad. To his credit, my teacher

welcomed my ire, encouraging discussion instead of trying to make me be quiet. See? I told you it was a good school!

I was always right there, down for the cause. When the African American student group and the Latino student group merged because neither was that big by itself, I was all up in the mix, ready to support. Plus, we all listened to the same music, had the same reference points. Did people think it was weird? Sure, especially other South Asians, whenever we got into conversations about race and culture.

Because back then, unlike now, there wasn't the kind of Indian pop culture here that there is now. Race was fairly bipolar in the larger sense—either you identified White or you identified Black. And it seemed to me that most South Asians who grew up like I did—professional, educated parents, homes in the suburbs as opposed to some ethnic enclave, etc.—tended to choose to identify more with the mainstream. So when I met folks, and would get into my musical tastes and political opinions, I rarely found a kindred spirit among my own.

It frustrated me to no end—hip-hop had helped me realize a lot of things, things I wanted to share with my community, and there wasn't really anyone to share it with, at least not that I knew of. So in some sense, I saw myself as apart from my community and felt a disconnect from other Desis that wouldn't get bridged for some years to come.

But on the other hand, hip-hop also brought me back to my culture. It was inevitable, I suppose. There I was as a teenager, listening to music from artists who celebrated who they were and spending time with friends who did the same. How could it not rub off on me?

I began to feel more comfortable in my skin and, beyond that, proud to be what I was. Maybe it's because I was growing up, but India became easier, a place I started to enjoy more because I started to see, and feel, and appreciate my roots. For someone who was always trying to figure out where I fit in, where I belonged, I finally was aware enough to understand that India was one of the places I could call home. All of the things I loved—my faith, which had given me so much solace after my father died, the history, the stories, the celebrations—they all came from this place. I really began to fall in love with India, a feeling that's only gotten stronger over the years.

And as my love for India grew, so did my sense of myself as an Indian American. (Notice I don't hyphenate it. That's on purpose. Whenever people see a hyphen, they seem to assume this connotation that the person being hyphenated is somehow betwixt and between, neither one nor the other.) I stopped feeling like I had something to prove, that I had to act a certain way to be considered "American" enough. I *was*—I *am*—an American. (More actively than some. Raise your hands if you voted in the last election. Uh-huh. Thought so.)

I was an American of Indian origin, who had her own faith and cultural background, one that I didn't need to hide from anyone. That's what America *means*, at least to me: people coming from all over to forge new lives for themselves, embracing the new but treasuring their own histories. I tried to live that in my own life—by the time I graduated from high school, I proudly wore Indian clothes to school to mark Hindu holidays. And I embrace that sense of myself today.

It's been almost twenty years since hip-hop entered my world. My relationship with it has changed since then, as the music itself has changed. The conscious era I found it in has been replaced with rappers much more likely to talk about their gems and their girls rather than pride in their community.

It's not a change I've embraced every step of the way, by any means. Clearly, I still listen to it, along with R&B and dancehall and salsa and reggaeton and pretty much anything that catches my ear. It's still the music I turn to when I want to dance, because a lot of the beats are hot. But lyrically? Eh. With a couple of exceptions here and there, it doesn't offer a lot for me to hold on to, for me to think about once the song has finished playing. (Hey man, if icing up your Rolex is what matters to you, then do it. It's not really my thing.) That's too bad for today's young listeners; I wish they could have the same listening opportunities I did.

But for myself, you know what? It's okay. Hip-hop and I are still cool, hopefully always will be. (Kinda like a good friend you may not see that often but you still think fondly of.) I may not find the inspiration in it that I used to, but now I don't need to. Thanks to the gift hip-hop was to me all those years ago, I know who I am, and I can inspire myself now.

# 6

# Making *Brown like Dat:* *South Asians and Hip-Hop*

*Raeshem Chopra Nijhon*

IT WAS A HIGH-ENERGY, HANDS-IN-THE-AIR, loud hip-hop show in the basement of The Middle East. I was in Boston supporting a heavy camera in a human tripod position, in a restaurant, in the dead of winter, looking out into a sea of White college-town boys, taping MC Kabir's show for my documentary *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*. Standing there on the side of the stage, and seeing such a large and diverse audience showing their love for a South Asian hip-hop emcee, I was reminded again of the reasons I had to make this documentary. It was worth it to have endured the many skeptics who felt that South Asians' involvement in hip-hop was just a fad, that it wouldn't last, and wasn't significant. Not to mention the challenges of production, backache-inducing cold in Boston, unbearable traffic in Los Angeles, unplanned budget explosions in Chicago, and insane working hours in my city, New York. All these "little things" kept me on my toes during the making of my first documentary.

I made *Brown like Dat* to give voice to South Asian emcees, beat-boxers, spoken-word artists, and producers. South Asians in America are stereotypically turbaned cab drivers, motel owners with heavy accents, young, slick doctors, brainy software engineers, traditional matchmaking mothers. I thought, What does it mean when this "model minority," perceived as politically passive and financially successful, ventures across its social boundaries into hip-hop culture? I wanted to know if, how, and why these artists were transcending the stereotypes. I wanted to explore this progressive community that was emerging from immigrant roots and forcing us to question "traditional" South Asian existence in America in fresh new ways. With hip-hop as its lens,

*Brown like Dat* became a colorful portrait of the rainbow of political ideals, social messages, and experiences that is in part young South Asian Americans today.

I was a film student at Tisch at NYU when I started making the documentary. I grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, a second-generation South Asian American. The South Asian community I grew up with was relatively homogenous and on the higher end of the socioeconomic ladder, wrapped in privilege and unaware of or unwilling to take on the responsibility that came with it. The community was one that banded together and supported one another, but I also felt we were isolated and out of touch with the racial and economic diversity that surrounded us. Our proximity to the city of Detroit, largely African American, and our disinterest in and even embedded fear of its culture and people exemplifies the self-created bubble of privilege and racism in which most people I knew chose to exist. We were separate from all others of color on a community level and bent upon creating even internal segmentation. Gujuratis, Punjabis, Telagu, Tamilians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis—many times we were not one as South Asian but rigidly boxed off into individual subcultures. At the same time, I was fortunate to have family and close friends who weren't held down by such artificial divisions and encouraged me to follow suit and find my way of taking action against these dangerous social constructions.

Upon reaching NYU I found much of the mainstream South Asian community there subscribing to the same stale paradigm concerned with upholding the stereotypes derived from the model-minority myth and an imagined "authentic" identity. However, I also found the brilliant underbelly of the mainstream South Asian community at NYU and in New York City: writers, poets, academics, doctors, business professionals, deejays, dancers, the list goes on, that were forward minded and engaged in pursuing life with an open mind and naturally pushing through the stagnant mold of living in a privileged bubble. At NYU I began reading some of the pioneering contemporary academics, some of who are part of this anthology, who opened the door to critical analysis of Asian American culture and Asian American youth culture, and I began to see communities I had experienced, shunned, and accepted come together in papers and books. It influenced me to be part of that critical analysis and find my niche and my way to raise social consciousness.

I felt that the South Asians who were living outside the barriers of conventions based on their progressive mindset or by their work had little visibility in the mainstream South Asian community. I found that many South Asians of all generations operated under the assumption that being South Asian in an "authentic" sense meant being a "model minority" and in turn meant feeling superior to those who divert from this path. The stereotypes placed on us as South Asians as an immigrant community in America and the stereotypes cre-

ated by us affect how we see ourselves, in turn reflecting in how dominant culture sees and represents us. As a community I felt it was our responsibility to accurately see and portray ourselves so others could follow suit. I realized that this struggle for accurate and three-dimensional visibility had to begin from within our community.

Hip-hop music and culture was fast becoming one of the many channels by which South Asian Americans were fighting this struggle. It is a place where this broader spectrum of South Asian American realities can be expressed and challenged. What I learned and captured on tape over the next year, meeting these individuals and telling their stories, is incredibly refreshing and central to redefining and stretching the boundaries of what it means to be South Asian in the United States.

## Ladies . . .

While researching for *Brown like Dat*, finding South Asian American women invested in hip-hop music and culture was challenging. I did, however, meet many women involved in the spoken-word branch of hip-hop. These women were making hip-hop a place to talk about plaguing stereotypes: that of the submissive South Asian woman being the "good" girl, the "exotifying"[1] of South Asian women in dominant culture, the expectations of South Asian women to uphold an imagined authentic tradition. All such stereotypes are limiting in nature, and many women used the expressive and emotive nature of spoken word to speak their mind on these issues. These women empowered themselves with hip-hop, fighting the dominant matrix of sexism and homophobia in mainstream hip-hop and mainstream South Asian communities.

> What if Mainstream rappers changed their ways / started remembering where they originally came from / the open legs of a woman / they dum-dums when they forget their mothers / be rapping 'bout hos sluts and bitches that can't do nothing but take dick in their crevices / I'm sick of that.[2]
> —D'Lo, spoken-word artist

Hip-hop music and culture was beginning to find its way into the mainstream South Asian community, and people wanted to witness what all the hype was about. Many of these individuals were creating music and rhymes in isolation from others; there was no sense of community for South Asian hip-hop artists. Although many of the artists may have been experimenting with hip-hop for years, it was still relatively new on the community level.

In 2002 Diasporadics, an NYC-based South Asian activist group, hosted a South Asian hip-hop showcase at the Asia Society on the Upper East Side.

"Livin' Off the 7" was such an electric evening. I myself performed as a dancer, and every artist I met there was stunning, motivated, and fresh. It was a sold-out show, and there was a feeling of excitement everywhere.

A few months later I began actually shooting *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*, and I started with interviewing the artists I'd met that night.

> My first shoot was in New York City with D'Lo, a Sri Lankan American producer and spoken-word artist. D'Lo was the enigmatic host of "Livin' off the 7." I had packed up my camera, a set of questions, and was meeting with D'Lo at a small café in the West Village. There are a few things I should mention that struck me the first few times we met. She identifies as transgender, always wearing her "uniform" I've come to call it—baggy jeans, a white T-shirt, and a button-down shirt. Sometimes she wore a bandana and sometimes just her shaved head with a layer of peach fuzz. Her voice was surprisingly sweet and melodic. D'Lo is a ball of energy with a look of mischief in her eyes. Talking about hip-hop, she came alive and spoke about it as her lifestyle, her culture, and her music. I was just starting to get a feel for the style of my documentary and how I would shoot and talk to people. I wanted the doc to be a story comfortably unfolding through these artists almost like a verse on a hip-hop track coming directly to the viewer—no filter, no narrator—just them. So I dropped the camera in my lap and I talked to D'Lo. We shot a two-hour interview. None of the footage from that particular interview made it to the final cut, but it sparked for me the process of critical analysis of South Asians around me. I began delving into the issues that my conversation with D'Lo had brought to surface: is hip-hop a space in which women can thrive and find ways to invest in themselves freely?

In her work anthropologist and assistant professor of African American studies at Northwestern University Dr. Nitasha Sharma talks about South Asian women in mainstream hip-hop and pop culture and the conflation of all Other cultures: "In his newly released song, 'React' (J Records), rappers Erick Sermon and Redman sampled their chorus from yet another Hindi song. In this song, Erick Sermon raps 'whatever she says, then I'm that,' and then refers to the woman as the 'Arabic chick.' This emphasizes both the conflation of South Asia with the Middle East and Erick Sermon's ignorance about who is singing the chorus and what is being sung."[3] Sharma brings to light this conflation of cultures and exotifying of South Asian women. Here, mainstream hip-hop is perpetuating modern-day Orientalism,[4] piling cultures into one undifferentiated package. It exemplifies how dominant hip-hop culture is disempowering to what is deemed as the Other. It demonstrates no desire to accurately represent marginalized cultures, in this case South Asian and Middle Eastern, in a significant way.

In addition to the dangerous conflation of cultures, women are often portrayed as sexual commodities, evident in the scores of music videos that rele-

gate women to sexual objects. The repetition of this theme limits women. In their substantial endeavors they often face skepticism as a result. I wanted to explore this theme in my documentary and spoke with DJ Rekha, a well-known deejay in New York and now internationally, who is credited with bringing Bhangra music to New York with her signature event Basement Bhangra.[5] She talked about being a workingwoman in the male-dominated world of deejays and hip-hop. She certainly came up against this very skepticism and felt the pressure to "prove herself." DJ Rekha has done much in the face of that to raise visibility for the South Asian community in a positive way. She is an example of the many women who have fought for their place in the male-dominated space of hip-hop. Her accomplishments speak louder than the palpable sexism that stands to define and confine her. Eventually I tuned my documentary to include only hip-hop emcees and spoken-word artists, but DJ Rekha's insight was invaluable in recognizing some of the barriers that exist for women in hip-hop.

Mainstream hip-hop is often criticized for hypermasculine and hypersexual lyrics and themes and for being primarily dominated by men. I was interested to see how these issues translated to South Asians involved in hip-hop as emcees, poets, writers. For D'Lo it is further complicated by her as transgender, being that both the South Asian community and mainstream hip-hop is notorious for its homophobic undertones. In her book *Desis in the House* Sunaina Maira explains a perspective that much of the South Asian community shares in regard to female sexuality, that of a "particular gendered view of culture in immigrant communities or nationalist movements where women are used to signify tradition and so must be controlled in order to maintain the boundaries of community."[6] D'Lo's sexual identification renders her "unfit" for such cultural mapping as her lifestyle is starkly out of line with this notion of "tradition." "Current articulations of diaspora tend to replicate and indeed rely upon conventional ideologies of gender and sexuality; once again, certain bodies (queer and/or female) are rendered invisible or marked as Other."[7] In spite of the emotional and moral resistance she faces from her communities, as an artist she leaves no room to tolerate oppressive misogyny or patriarchal dominance. Getting deeper under society's often-puritanical skin, she is fearlessly vocal about her sexuality. In the South Asian community where homosexuality remains largely a taboo subject, D'Lo's work and life tirelessly chip away at the discomfort surrounding homosexuality. She does the same in the hip-hop community, a community that has homophobic facets and is openly derogatory at times. D'Lo makes her mark with enormous spirit and biting lyricism. Her unwillingness to be disempowered by the dominant culture of mainstream hip-hop is admirable. She is an example of an individual who has successfully managed to engage so many parts of herself in

harmony, being a transgender individual, a hip-hop artist, a South Asian American. She is an exception in a community where identities are often wrongfully interpreted as mutually exclusive. As an Indian American I, myself, have been told numerous times, "Wow, you're a filmmaker—that's so not Indian-like of you!" It was an odd feeling, that part of my identity socially barred me from other parts, irritating in fact. It was refreshing to meet people that were effectively leaving such notions in the dust. The importance of questioning and challenging the boundaries consciously and unconsciously placed upon us resonated with me. This idea of engaging all parts of our identity simultaneously and successfully became central in my treatment for *Brown like Dat.* I wanted to explore spaces where this collision of identities was inevitable and creating change. Soon after interviewing D'Lo, I had my first chance to do so.

> D'Lo called me, excited: she'd been invited to own one of the coveted and aggressively sought-after spots on Russell Simmons's Def Poetry Jam taping in New York City. She had a few guest tickets, and I was able to attend and support her.
>
> Simmons, the hip-hop mogul, created Def Poetry Jam on HBO to shine spotlight on the often overshadowed urban poetry scene. It was certainly mainstream yet had an underground feel to it. I wasn't allowed to shoot for my documentary, but I arrived early to the taping and stood up in the balcony as The Supper Club was already packed with people of all races and ages. In artist after artist I saw diversity: women, men, mostly African Americans, a few Asian Americans. I couldn't help but feel some underlying tension before D'Lo came on, although the audience was progressive and generally forward minded I wasn't convinced that her appearance and her sexuality would go unnoticed. Mos Def, an artist who most of the artists I'd been talking to considered an influence, was the host. He was extremely supportive to all the poets and welcomed D'Lo to the stage. A tense silence hung in the air before she started her performance, and it flared my temper when I heard a snicker next to me; needless to say I shot a deadly look in that direction. It may have been my own insecurity as one of the few South Asians in the audience, but I felt skepticism around me. A hip-hop audience is hard to please, because it tests its performers and responds to only what impresses. D'Lo, with her uncanny ability to win people over, owned her piece and the stage for her few moments. She dissolved any doubt the audience could have held as she hammered out her poetry with strong feminine/masculine confidence. I was so proud of her and felt like she'd shown people we (South Asians) could do this too, we were part of this culture as much as the next artist, and we were a force to be acknowledged. It was very exciting for me, and the importance of *Brown like Dat* swelled even thicker in my mind. The audience gave in with catcalls and enthusiastic applause.

D'Lo performing at Def Poetry Jam is change for the hip-hop community, it's forcibly expanding the inner circle of who it includes, and it is change for South Asian men and women. It is a new place for South Asian women to live and see themselves. At Def Poetry Jam, D'Lo was South Asian, she was a poet, she was queer identified, she was a woman, she was all of who she is, unfiltered. Similarly, when DJ Rekha spins at high-profile events for famed musician Billy Joel or world-renowned writer Salman Rushdie, her presence and power speak to the boundaries she breaks down as a female and as a South Asian and as a deejay. In effect, the women and individuals I was talking with were breaking the stereotypes associated with their identities by presenting and living them all at one time. This seemed to be a common theme with all the artists I met.

In discussing South Asians tearing down their own walls, it's crucial to consider the internal diversity of culture, language, religion, and nationality when working simultaneously toward unity and change for the community. *South Asian* is a broad term, and some groups are more inflexible about gender roles and place than others. In her personal essay published in Sangeeta Gupta's compilation "Emerging Voices" Sabah Aafreen writes:

> When I say *my community* I am referring to a specific sect of Islam. My community is a sect of Islam. . . . Like most cultures the South Asian culture is largely patriarchal. As in most South Asian cultures, women in my particular community do not have an identity of their own.[8]

Women are often thought to be "vessels of tradition,"[9] preservers of a self-invented "authentic" South Asian culture. Often, the notion of "authenticity" is rigid in nature. "Some of the same youth who participate in the club scene and hang out at Desi parties also describe this hybrid popular culture as "diluted" or somehow not authentically Indian." Hip-hop is intimately tied to this "hybrid popular culture" and perceived as a sharp departure from "Indian" or "South Asian." Both this imagined authenticity and delegating women to remain "keepers of the culture" limit choice and force women to carry the burden of perceived purity. The women I met and interviewed are those that are using hip-hop to mark new territory as "possible" and finding ways to express all parts of who they are all the time. Aafreen's experience is not hers alone, and it is ideal that young women have an outlet to independence if they so desire. When young South Asian women see others like themselves in places previously thought to be outside possibility, the hope is that they are encouraged to step outside the boundaries set for them and, at times, by them. In *Brown like Dat*, I began searching for artists and experiences that sought to encourage change and evolve gender roles and expectations through their lyricism and message.

I found a seed for this change when I was introduced to a young and fierce Pakistani American hip-hop group Abstract Vision/Humanity.

> Some people feel the way of the select few is the way of the masses / that's why knowledge is so vital / ignorance only fuels hostility / and hostility only few violence / so hear I come to break the silence.
>
> Many ignorant fools from far and wide feel that oppression is how one should reside / seclusion of women and false interpretations / lead to the destruction of many nations / They believe they're exclusively correct / rape their women and slash their necks / a "democracy" simultaneously livin' the ways of hypocrisy / a false recognition of the female rights / Islamic ways are far far more contrite
> —Abstract Vision/Humanity from "(H)Islam"

Asad and Fahad, two young Pakistani and Muslim men who perform under the name Abstract Vision/Humanity, wrote this track to promote equality and rights for women in their community, chiding those "ignorant fools" that excel through oppression. I was inspired seeing young men addressing women's issues so deeply entangled in culture and religion. In their interview for *Brown like Dat*, they explained how their lyricism is their way of stepping forward to encourage their community and peers to take action against sexism and gender bias. Their work and message through hip-hop signified for me how the community is evolving.

## . . . and Gentlemen

After some time into my research for *Brown like Dat*, I started focusing on how hip-hop was affecting South Asian men that were deeply involved and dedicated to it. I wanted to know if hip-hop could serve as a space to empower men being that mainstream pop culture is often emasculating of Asian American men.

> I'd heard about a hip-hop duo called Himalayan Project through some of the artists I'd met from performing in "Livin' Off the 7." One member, Chee Malabar, was South Asian American, and the other, Rainman, was Chinese American. I found their CD online at undergroundhiphop.com and raced through the album as soon as I got it in the mail. I was at my parents home in Detroit when I first heard the "Middle Passage" on my little boombox while squinting to keep up with the lyrics written in the CD jacket. I think I jumped up and down a couple times, I was so impressed and energized. Their sound was so original, so different, and their lyricism so thought-provoking and informed. I e-mailed Chee Malabar the next day, trying to articulate the goals of my doc, which at that time were still evolving, and set up a meeting and a shoot for when I got back to New York.

> Chee seemed intrigued by the project; he'd been an emcee for years and he was just getting exposure in the South Asian community and meeting other South Asian artists. I added that to my list of goals: to help these emcees meet each other—they all seemed so isolated and refreshed to hear about each other.

> Chee and I met in Central Park in New York a week later. When I first saw Chee I remember him being very distinct, tall and lean with a head of long curly hair. He was immediately different from most South Asians I knew. He seemed comfortable and at home immersed in hip-hop culture. As soon as we started talking it was obvious that he was true to hip-hop music and culture and made it part of his daily life. Chee's ideas were well-developed, articulate, and significant to the dialogue that hip-hop creates.

> Most of what you see in the media of men are the emasculated versions of South Asians, East Asians, and I think that's tragic. I'm still a man; I can handle my business. That's why, you know, hip-hop empowers you in so many ways."
> —Chee Malabar, *Brown like Dat.*

It has been hypothesized and well-researched that South Asian males have adopted hip-hop in part to counter emasculation in mainstream media, and it has been said that it may be based on other factors such as childhood experience and socioeconomic factors.[10] After interviewing about twenty hip-hop artists—men and women—the artists I met fell somewhere between the two assertions. Hip-hop by nature is empowering to all who take it on, and the artists I was meeting involved themselves in socially conscious and message rap. "Virtually all manifestations of message rap bear witness to resistance against overt external oppression."[11] Hip-hop undoubtedly can be an avenue to fight emasculation, but I found that the men I spoke with were not embracing hip-hop solely for this reason. On the contrary it seemed to be more a byproduct of their dedication to the music and culture.

Reflecting on Chee's assertions about Asian American men in media being emasculated, I started raking through my own memories, specifically from my childhood, and tried to come up with a list of South Asian men I remember seeing on American TV. It could be that my memory fails me, but my list was short. Oddly enough my most distinct memory is relatively obscure but has stayed with me. I remember watching *The Late Show with David Letterman* with my father and seeing two recurring characters Sirajul and Mujiber, immigrant workers in a Times Square souvenir shop. As a kid I actually remember being pleasantly surprised that someone "Indian" was on TV; they are Bangladeshi, but as a child my thought process was less sophisticated—I thought "if they looked like me then they were Indian (as I am)." It was exciting but at the same time a little embarrassing as a result of how they were contextualized by Letterman. Letterman hired them to travel North America and

report back to the show. During their segments Letterman would proceed to slyly chuckle at their accent or their appearance. It was insulting. My father would laugh but I remember him grumbling about them "being treated like clowns" and then invariably becoming acutely aware of his own mild Indian accent. Sirajul and Mujibur incited anger in immigrants across lines of class, struggling to create a place and identity for themselves in America. Letterman's perceived exploitation of these men was a seen as a perpetuation of the stereotypes that the community was working to transcend.

> At a Manhattan restaurant popular with Bangladeshi taxi drivers, opinions are as hot as the five-alarm curry. "These two people are stupid!" snaps one hacker. "They joined another stupid person, David Letterman, who does not have any respect for other cultures!" Among better-educated Bangladeshis, the unease is scarcely less intense. The Bangladesh Association of New England meets next month to draft a letter of complaint to the *Late Show*—the first such formal protest.[12]
> —*TIME Magazine*, 1994

Sirajul and Mujibur were awarded "eternal foreigner status" by this portrayal—not exactly an encouraging image for young South Asian men. "Ninety percent of the people of Bangladeshi origin living in New York can't speak the English of the average American," observes travel agent Mohammed Hossain. "Letterman seems to be enjoying their failure."[13] Ironically, when asked about the controversy, Mujibur calls it "nonsense," claiming, "Those guys jealous."[14] One might miss the fact that Sirajul has a master's degree in literature and Mujibur has a master's degree in political science.[15] With accomplished men like Sirajul and Mujibur being publicly framed by American pop culture as bumbling, the visibility for South Asian men in American media was bleak and biased. Many characters followed Sirajul and Mujibur, including the ineradicable Kwik-E-Mart proprietor Apu of the popular television series *The Simpsons.* Although the outlook has greatly improved, to date we fight for accurate portrayals of our lives. Chee's assertion that hip-hop "empowers people" rang true for me; it empowers emcees to write about such emasculating trends, express frustration, and offer their truth. Hip-hop is a culture that thrives on self-reflection and self-promotion allowing individuals to clearly speak their mind—no filters, no boxes, no biases needed.

Hip-hop is a culture born from social struggle and political frustration. At the time of its birth, the 1970s, the United States faced vast economic and political struggle; people were becoming socially involved and conscious, talking back to the government, questioning their lives and rights. It was a fiery post-civil-rights climate and a time of action. For some, hip-hop became a vehicle for these discussions and a place for people to empower themselves. As the

emcee culture evolved self-elevation became central to it. "Dissin'" (insulting or putting down) the competition became the cornerstone of early rap's style."[16] People used hip-hop to bring light to their own greatness, their own power. It became a convention of the culture. In the essay "The Rap Attack" Perkins references the influential hip-hop duo Run DMC exemplifying this in "Sucker MCs":

> You're a five dollar boy and I'm a million dollar man / You're a sucker emcee, and you're my fan / You try to bite lines from friends of mine / but you're very banal, you're just a sucker emcee / a sad-faced clown.
> —Run DMC, from "Sucker MCs"

The commercial inflation of hip-hop has translated this "cornerstone" into bragging about big cars, bigger cars, big diamonds, and bigger diamonds, but in its beginnings this aspect of hip-hop was empowering for a people who felt forgotten by the government and socially silenced. From all this evolved hip-hop's incredible power to create aura and presence for the artist. The emcee battle is the ultimate test of this presence; here "emcees must be able to perform dis to gain a modicum of acceptance and respect."[17] The battle is a place for an emcee to rhyme fiercer, smarter, harsher, and with a brimming cool confidence that will slam his opponent. As far as emasculation of the Asian male, an emcee battle is a surefire place to put that notion to rest:

Regrettably, I didn't have a video camera that night, but I went to NYC's Sin Sin for their monthly emcee battle. Utkarsh Ambudkar had invited me. He was an emcee I'd met well into the editing process of *Brown like Dat*, so we didn't shoot an interview, but he had spit a verse for the documentary. One of *Brown like Dat*'s ambitions was to create exposure and support for these underground artists, so I always did my best to attend their shows and events. I'd had low expectations for a Monday night battle starting at 11 P.M., but my two friends and I walked into a bustling, bumpin' second-floor space with a blaring sound system packed with people: White people, African Americans, Asians, college kids, aspiring emcees, girls on a night out—you name it, all there for the hip-hop. The battle was a basic set-up: emcees rhymed their way through three rounds, and eventually the pool came down to four semifinalists. The winners of each round were determined by audience response. Battles have an incredible kinetic energy about them; everyone is deeply invested in the emcees, their rhymes, their flow, and everyone participates with their sounds of approval, distaste, and best of all, when they are impressed, the response is invigorating. Utkarsh was the only South Asian in the battle. At the time Utkarsh was a junior in college and was going up against emcees who'd probably been in the game longer, intimidating emcees, people who take their craft seriously, and he was treated as an equal contender. He was confident on

stage. His rhymes were fresh and cutting, and his flow was smooth. He was holding his own in a space where he was minority and marginalized, but it didn't faze him. If anything I think it was his fuel. With deafening applause, he made it to the last round, and, until then, Utkarsh hadn't leaned for a moment on his "race" card, he focused on more neutral "self-elevation" and cutting down his opponent with clever lyricism and tight rhymes. In the final round, his opponent, in desperation, started hating on "curry" and "Apu" and "Indian this and Indian that." I thought it was a weak moment for that emcee, and the audience agreed. Utkarsh bit him back hard and with a smarter sophisticated reprimand for being so low. I wish I could recall his verse but in the intensity of the battle every word is so crucial that there is little room to remember the previous one. It was a tough hip-hop audience, but we collectively gave it up to Utkarsh in the end. He was undoubtedly the strongest emcee of the lot, and he earned his trophy. I'd be willing to bet that a significant percentage of the people there had never seen a South Asian emcee, and they wouldn't have been surprised had he been soft. Now, I hoped, they'd think twice next time they doubted an emcee because of the color of his/her skin.

In a post–9/11 climate we've seen an even greater attentiveness to South Asian immigrants, men in particular, in American news and media. Much of this attention is negative and focused on creating vilifying portrayals of terrorists and religious fundamentalists. Such extreme caricatures are constantly rearing their heads into pop culture and in American news sources. The positive, well-adjusted, largely realistic ones are few and far between. I saw Chee's frustration, I felt his desire to turn it all on its head, and hip-hop was his way.

> I'm on some shit like a septic tank / halfway to a progressive leftist stance / not right enough to visit Memphis with Elvis fans / I'm the man standing in the middle, vexed / a new-school version of an embattled Malcolm Little / When I'm pissed and bitter / I'm turnin' your city block quick into the Yellow River/In this era hip-hop is America's mirror / . . . Before your subsequent reactions to Islam / this Brown skin, goatee, and nose I've been had 'em / before your minute world ever heard of a Bin Laden.
> —Chee Malabar, from *Brown like Dat*

Here Chee's passion and voice are so strong and probing. The verse touches on a variety of issues. The core uprising subtext is the will to fight the stale stereotypes with action and knowledge. "I'm turnin' your city block quick into the Yellow River": he embodies fearlessness and a desire to challenge oppressive authority. "This Brown skin, goatee, and nose I've been had 'em / before your minute world ever heard of a Bin Laden": he is recognizing the shift in attitude toward South Asian men in particular post–9/11. He is commenting on how many people, brainwashed by a barrage of media images, may sud-

denly reevaluate with fear and/or hate someone or something they've known for years. Under doctor, lawyer, businessman, on the stereotype list we can now add terrorist. "In this era hip-hop is America's mirror." Hip-hop has become so universal, so global, so widespread that it truly is a reflection of a society of people from all walks of life and of all colors and a tool to stand up and speak out. As are all the artists I've met and others out there, Chee is intelligent, unafraid to speak his mind, politically informed and active. He embraces his "foreigner status"; but instead of that leaving him vulnerable to ridicule and emasculation as it has with South Asian men in American media in the past, in hip-hop it is his trump card, a way to stand apart and illuminate new issues.

For South Asians these moments of progress are significant drops in the bucket. Utkarsh reminded me of that the night he won that battle. Chee Malabar reminded me of that with his lucid rhymes and dedication. The contributions of these artists and their peers are a testament to how individuals can affect the ever-shifting boundaries of "Asian American man" or any stereotype they seek to strip of its validity.

When finally sitting in the edit room with hours and hours of footage for *Brown like Dat* I regret having to shave down interviews that focused on these pressing and vital issues regarding gender. The "editor" in me had to choose my battles and focus on fewer issues in more detail. In the end, the bulk of the gender and sexuality fell to the "cutting room floor" so to speak. I struggled with that choice knowing its essential role in this movement. I kept bits of these interviews in the final documentary in effort to bring the issues to surface—I hoped to urge viewers to probe deeper on their own.

## The Model-Minority Myth

It was now November of 2002, and I'd been working on the documentary for about six months. I realized I had to venture out of the East Coast in order to bring to surface the importance and widespread nature of South Asians getting involved in hip-hop. I had seen the LA-based hip-hop group Karmacy perform at "Livin off the 7" in New York and decided to plan an LA shoot. I roped in a friend to come along to assist me; we arrived in LA, rented a car, booked a hotel, rented a camera, and were ready for our first of four West Coast shoots. After settling into our hotel, a Ramada Inn owned by a Gujurati family, Ayesha and I headed to our first shoot—a Karmacy performance at The Key Club, a nightclub and live-music venue in LA. We had arrived early to set up our camera, get a feel for the venue, and set up a sound feed from the soundboard. As people filed in, I was surprised and encouraged by the diversity.

The audience was primarily South Asian, but there were also Filipino Americans, African Americans, and other Asian Americans. I spoke to a number of audience members that night; many of them said they were admittedly curious about seeing four South Asian emcees (since the shoot and *Brown like Dat*, the makeup of Karmacy has shifted from four to three emcees, and they no longer record under the Rukus Avenue label). "These guys have taken hip-hop and used it to talk about the stories of their people and made it really universal" one Filipino American woman told me. During their performance, I could see people genuinely connecting to the music and getting involved in the experience. Karmacy had its own following in LA, and people responded when they heard familiar songs. "Outkasted," one of their first songs but most widely known, was met with cheers and people singing along, bopping their heads along, and dancing in place.

> Hey yo 1974 that was the genesis / the first chapter in the life and times of this nemesis / to all the menaces kickin' their subtle prejudice / addressin' us with stereotypical references / still oppressin' us by fillin' the syllabus with lessons of how to get the best of us in ancient fisticuffs / malicious messages taken from history texts and such / keep us locked in mental prisons for unprecedented sentences / supposedly what I'm supposed to be and what was meant for me is told through the odyssey of my ancestry / instead I choose to separate destiny and heredity / and bomb everybody's perception of our identity.
> —KB of Karmacy, from "Outkasted"

KB's verse is articulate and thought-provoking. In its wake it forces the listener to process how racism finds itself in the very structure of the South Asian American community. He talks about structural racism "by fillin' the syllabus with lessons of how to get the best of us with ancient fisticuffs." A racism that is engineered and taught is the root of stereotypes. He is bringing to surface the dangers of the model-minority myth. The myth serves as a root to structural racism and leads to myriad social issues. Briefly, the model-minority myth began in reference to Chinese Americans and is now widely applied to Asian Americans.

> After the historic Civil Rights Act and in the context of the Watts uprising of 1965, *US News and World Report* ran a story on Chinese Americans who believe, we are told, in the "old idea that people should depend on their own efforts—not a welfare check—in order to reach America's "promised land.'" This autonomous effort, the magazine argued, came at "a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions of dollars be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities." As if to say protest is un-American, the myth of the model minority emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights movement to show up rebellious Blacks for their attempts to redress power relations.[18]
> —Vijay Prashad

In its evolution over time, the model-minority myth has come to suggest that Asian Americans are somehow culturally superior and politically passive, "overachieving" and financially secure individuals. In its condescending "praise" for Asian Americans, it inherently suggests that Blacks and Latinos are the very opposite and should look to Asian Americans as a model. This is a dangerous and faulty social construction that, among other issues, creates polarizing division within the South Asian American community. Many South Asians feel pressure to conform to inflated social expectations exacerbated by the model-minority myth, to pursue professions and lifestyles that fit this mold for the sake of fitting this mold. Many are finding themselves conflicted between following a more desirable unbeaten path and a path expected of them. "The price of the model-minority myth for these youth is often self-denial, guilt, and frustration."[19] In his verse, KB says "I choose to separate destiny and heredity and bomb everybody's perception of our identity." This line, in reference to the model-minority myth, urges people to break out of this mold if they so desire and challenge the boundaries that have been set by the model-minority myth based on skin color and culture. In his book *Karma of Brown Folk* Vijay Prashad encourages readers to "commit model minority suicide, to demonstrate against reality and re-create a form of Asian misbehavior as Desi as Gandhi."[20]

The model-minority myth has created a link between race and a notion of "success" for South Asian Americans. This notion of success has become limited and measured by financial and professional status. While further exploring its relationship to these hip-hop artists, I was constantly seeing the various ways in which the model-minority myth was rippling out influence. When I began research for *Brown like Dat* I was so focused on hip-hop's effects on relationships between African Americans and South Asian Americans that I hadn't formed the questions about socioeconomic hierarchy within the South Asian community and how hip-hop spoke to that.

I was meeting Fahad, Asad, and Ali—members of the hip-hop group Abstract Vision/Humanity—in Staten Island, New York, where they live to tape and interview them. They were a fiery bunch with strong convictions at a young age. At the time, the oldest member was nineteen and the youngest fifteen.

I rode the Staten Island ferry from Manhattan to Staten Island where they lived. It was a gorgeous breezy spring day, and I sat where I could get a good view of the Statue of Liberty. She represents something so central in the immigrant experience woven in closely with the "American Dream"—whether that truly exists or not, I am not sure. I always think of my parents moving to America from India at such young ages—my mother nineteen and my father twenty-six and the excitement they must have felt, building a life here. It's amazing how much the community has evolved since their migration in the early 1970s. My uncle tells me now that when he first moved to Detroit, people would actually call him

> "Doc" when he went to the store or the movies, assuming that he was a doctor based on the fact that he was Indian. At that time, South Asians were migrating to the United States in droves, specifically degree-wielding professionals—as these were the individuals the United States needed to build their own economy. There were quite a few people on the ferry that day, going back and forth to get a free and quick view of Lady Liberty. I reached Staten Island within twenty minutes.

Abstract Vision/Humanity is a powerful duo. I was blown away by their knowledge, their passion at such a young age. It was inspiring. The first part of our interview we taped right on the water with the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty in the background. During the course of our three-hour interview they told me, "The South Asian community is really shaped by the upper-middle-class ideals, and hip-hop talks about how that is not all there is; there is more to our community. We use our music to smash the model-minority myth."

Again the model-minority myth rears its ugly head; it allows people to believe that the South Asian community is of a certain financial status and politically passive based solely on their cultural values—marginalizing a substantial number of people in the community and creating an internal divide. Subscribing to this idea of South Asians being politically passive by nature always strikes me as ironic seeing as how South Asian visionary Mahatma Gandhi is credited as the father of nonviolent disobedience. His historic influence touched protests and uprisings around the world including the work of pivotal Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States. Some fail to see the connection between the careful governmental engineering of the South Asian community in America and the perpetuation of the model-minority myth. "In 1965, an important year in U.S. history, the new immigration law was promulgated; it allowed scores of techno-professional workers to enter the U.S."[20] The U.S. government essentially hand picked those individuals who would seemingly contribute most to the United States collective intelligence and economy. It is no coincidence that the first wave of South Asian immigrants to the United States was an artificial concentration of educated professionals. The 1980s and onward saw broader cross-class migrations of South Asians. Sandya Shukla in her work "New Immigrants, New Forms of Transnational Community" talks about this first wave of South Asian migration and its formation in America as "it was this developing Indian American middle class that assumed a central role in producing a sense of community in the diaspora." In her discussion of these "Little Indias" she highlights how this is apparent in the daily lives of the community, "Edison, particularly, serves a more suburban and affluent population that has moved away from and no longer wants to travel to multiethnic and multiclass Queens [in refer-

ence to Jackson Height]."[21] Here, attitudes rooted in the myth are at work creating two communities within one. South Asian Americans are constructing a barrier between those that have somehow followed the path of the model-minority myth and those who have not either by choice or necessity. Abstract Vision/Humanity, both living in the privilege and comfort of middle-class communities, were angry about this. Their willingness and desire to educate themselves on such realities was refreshing, as it's very easy to remain complacent and uninvolved when one has the privilege and choice not to. It proved to me that hip-hop can be a bridge between communities and within communities. They used their music to draw attention to issues of this kind. The chorus of their track "Survivor" declares:

> They come to profit / divide and conquer / breaking great nations sake of the father / constantly fightin' / mother fuck the empire.
> —Abstract Vision/Humanity, from "Survivor"

In this chorus they are alluding to the social constructions (model-minority myth and what it branches off into) created in this case by "they." I asked them who "they" was in reference to. "In this track 'they' is in reference to the American government and the privileged upper class that emulates it. These constructions of class and then this model-minority bullshit create divides between people, a divide that is profitable to a higher power as it weakens the people as a political and social force—in this case Asian Americans." Abstract Vision/Humanity is challenging the "empire" (America and those that are irresponsible with their privilege) and through their music is critiquing the social boundaries constructed through mainstream media and social policies. Heavy. Fantastic.

## South Asians: Our Internal Divide

Abstract Vision/Humanity's social consciousness inspired questions I asked other artists. When interviewing Karmacy, I approached the issue of how they were perceived within the South Asian American community and from outside it. "We got booed off stage, and we got a couple fingers. . . . We had our share of struggles," KB told me in an interview. They faced skepticism and resistance; people have a little bit of the model-minority myth etched on their brain, and four South Asian hip-hop emcees don't exactly fit that model. Swap, a Karmacy member, told me that he found they faced the most resistance within the South Asian community. What they considered their own people were their biggest skeptics. I attribute a large part of that to the harmful

internalization of the myth. In Karmacy's track "Outkasted" Sammy Chand says in his verse:

> They'll never ever comprehend all the dreams I left for them / because they're savages/ caught up in their Dow Jones Averages/ no care for Rukus Avenue or it's many addresses.
> —Sammy Chand of Karmacy, from "Outkasted"

At the time, Rukus Avenue was Karmacy's record label, the premiere South Asian record label in the country. He's speaking to the alienation that happens between two sides of one community. A division exists between those who follow the path fitting the model-minority myth to attain a limited notion of success for the sake of this ideal and those who may follow a less beaten path in pursuit of their "dreams." Both choices are significant and should be equally respected; unfortunately the latter often tends to be overshadowed. I had personal experience with this. Through the process of producing *Brown like Dat*, I encountered both unconditional support and rigid dubiousness from my various communities. Often, I found myself convincing my South Asian contemporaries that hip-hop was in fact a legitimate plank in the South Asian American experience, not just a whimsical trend or hijack of African American culture. It was a challenge explaining to some first-generation working professionals why they should care about a young beat-boxer or rapper, and, surprisingly, this skepticism trickled down to many of my peers in the second-generation bracket. In addition to questioning the content of *Brown like Dat*, I came up against the skepticism surrounding my own work as a filmmaker. I heard it many times: "Is filmmaking and documentary film in fact a 'real' profession with significant impact on society?" "How will you make money?" "So what is you job exactly?" My struggles paralleled those I was documenting; it further fueled my passion for my work. The frustration was overwhelming at times, but, with support, I maintained my faith in the significance of the artists' stories.

Of all the skepticism, there was one question that always struck me as most naïve: "Why aren't you being Indian-like?" When such a question is posed to any of the artists I have met with, it always strikes me as an uninformed perpetuation of trite stereotypes. The question inherently creates social boundaries for what is and is not expected or "normal" for South Asians. These artists are not defined by these social boundaries; they are pushing them to include what is new, what is current. In the case of Karmacy specifically, they use hip-hop to talk about who they are, and their South Asian identity is part of that. On their track "Euphoria" they rap in Gujurati and Punjabi, some of their native South Asian languages. Using their roots as inspiration, one of their tracks, "Blood Brothers," explores the relationship and contrast of experience between brothers, one in the United States and one in India. Karmacy

especially prides themselves on creating a unique blend of East and West coining the term *fusion hip-hop*. Their music is a sharp observation of the world around them and it sparks progressive dialogue in a community polarized by their own preconceived notions about one another.

### Why Are You Trying to Be Black?

I thought to myself, If people are asking these artists "Why aren't you being Indian?" then there must be a follow-up question. More often than not it is "Why are you trying to be Black?" I realized I needed to explore this complicated question of race and how it was tied to hip-hop. *Brown like Dat* was gaining momentum, and I had raised enough money to fund more shoots out of the New York area. I speed tutored some friends of mine in lighting and sound and convinced them to drive to Toronto with me to interview Jugular, an incredible beat-boxer well known in the Toronto hip-hop community. Jugular's perspective was different than most of the other artists I was talking with, as he wasn't writing rhymes or directly speaking to social issues. His love of hip-hop and the originality he brings to beat-boxing, a branch of hip-hop often overshadowed by emceeing and deejays, is an exceptional contribution. I interviewed Jugular at his apartment in Toronto:

> My first show was at this place called 52 inc, a club in Toronto. When I first walked in there it was mostly Black people, and people were just looking at me thinking "Interesting cat," not really knowing what to expect. The funniest thing was when I jumped on stage; and after I threw it down the response was just like, "Yo man, that was the bomb," and high-fives and soul claps. And the funniest thing was after the show this girl came up to me, and she was Black, and she said ,"I just learned an amazing lesson today; never judge a book by its cover"; and that's exactly where it comes from—sure you might feel segregated or that you don't belong, but it's up to you jump in there.
> —Jugular, *Brown like Dat*

The relationship between African Americans and South Asian Americans is a complicated one. It's a central issue in talking about South Asian Americans, members of a "model minority," stepping in hip-hop, a culture born in Black and Latino communities. For Jugular it was simple, to continue to push the envelope in his craft and be true to his passion in the face of adversity. The model-minority myth plays a defining role in how many Black Americans and South Asian Americans have learned to relate. The myth puts Asian Americans on a pedestal for their success and attributes this to their "superior" cultural values, thereby indirectly placing Blacks and Latinos as a "not-so-model"

minority holding inferior cultural values. It pits people of color against each other. The issue of Blackness, hip-hop, and South Asians merging is two-fold. There is the internal issue of South Asians doubting and downgrading one another's involvement in hip-hop and the external issue of other communities being skeptical of South Asians in hip-hop based on their race. In my research, I found both alliances being built between South Asian and African American communities as well as the prerequisite step to even stronger alliances, bridges being built within the South Asian community. Only with a unified state of mind can a community build significant racial alliances with others. In interviewing the range of artists I had met to date, I saw these fascinating ties and barriers between the South Asian and African American communities on the micro level.

Every artist in *Brown like Dat* mentions the unfortunate existence of negative racism against Blacks within South Asian communities. This ugly racism alienates many within the South Asian community and often hip-hop artists in particular as they are part of a culture closely connected to African American culture. Jugular explained his alienation: "I've heard a lot of comments, negative comments, against Black people within the South Asian community. It made me feel separate. . . . I've never felt that way about anybody, and the model-minority myth I think that's a just a way of segregating us." Jugular had in a sense expanded his own definition of community and felt alienated from people who wanted to hold onto him but disaffect him from others he felt attached to. This was unacceptable. Jugular had already created a bridge for himself, and his unwillingness to break that is a stepping-stone to breaking down barriers on the community level. "If we Desis are racist, we tend to think, then we must either reject Desiness entirely or else come to grips with this as a part of our culture,"[22] Prashad tells us in *The Karma of Brown Folk.* He brings this complacent attitude that many South Asian share to light and encourages his readers to find ways to maintain connection to their roots but resist perpetuating racism and bigotry through silence. The artists in *Brown like Dat* fell all over the spectrum. Some felt alienated from their communities, like Jugular, and affected change as examples from the outside while others wished to remain immersed in the South Asian community and directly affect change from the inside out.

Boston-based MC Kabir, half-Indian, half-Italian, says to the issue, "If people were to ask me why I was trying to be Black I would respond by saying that I've been influenced by Black culture all my life. Some of the greatest Jazz musicians, Blues musicians, hip-hop artists have been Black, and that has influenced the way I talk, the things that I do, and the music I make. Does that mean I am trying to be Black? I don't see it that way." Kabir's confident approach on who he is speaks to how these artists are taking part in redefining

"South Asian." By acknowledging the positive role of Black culture in his life, he is a bridge between communities and reenforces that "South Asian American" is a fluid construct. South Asians being a relatively young and growing minority in the United States are in a phase where identity formation is critical. The molds are constantly being broken and rebuilt.

In general, race in the United States is largely defined by Blacks and Whites while other groups often fall into the muddy middle. MC Utkarsh Ambudkar shared a verse with me for *Brown like Dat.* He came by my editing room one afternoon to record it:

> Apparently I am not hip-hop / Apparently I'm not American / Though I was born in Baltimore / When people see my melanin they look at me suspiciously immediately questionin' the credibility of what I'm doin' and where I been' / Based on the fact that my face ain't White or Black / When I pick up the mic to spit I'm hit with whack shit like / Actually rap's something you can't touch because your parents worked hard and now they make too much / So stick to the sciences and math and such / Yo' rhyme flow don't got no strength 'pon the streets so sorry Brown bro keep makin' slurpees / But I'm like I'm so cold when I rap my words freeze then they sit there in the air for you to see / Yet you still say that I'm not an emcee.
> —Utkarsh Ambudkar, *Brown like Dat*

Utkarsh brings attention to the Black and White nature of America's race politics. He is expressing frustration with how minorities in "the middle" are defined by how far they assimilate toward what is stereotyped as White or Black. This brings skepticism to their choices, as opposed to having their own identity. "When people see my melanin they look at me suspiciously / immediately questionin' the credibility of what I'm doin' and where I've been / based on the fact / that my face ain't White or Black."

The verse probes into the stagnant idea that stereotypically South Asians exist on one end of the financial/professional spectrum or the other: "Stick to the sciences and math and such," referring to South Asian professionals, engineers, doctors, and alternately, "Sorry Brown bro keep making Slurpees," in reference to the many South Asians working in convenience stores, gas stations, 7-Elevens. The questioning of "authenticity" is an overwhelming idea in the verse, evident in the last lines, "Yet you still say that I'm not an emcee." Here he challenges what the face of hip-hop "should be," what is expected, and puts to shame those who fail to think outside this box.

Utkarsh's verse brings into question, Is hip-hop a Black thing? Are South Asians appropriating another community's art form? All the artists I spoke to had an individual take on these questions and unique reasons for their convictions.

D'Lo and I spoke about the issue during an interview in her apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, before she moved back to Los Angeles. "Hip-hop was born in the Black communities, and if Black people and Latino people they got a problem with it [South Asians in hip-hop] that's just ownership. But hip-hop has evolved." Hip-hop really has become a global phenomenon and picked up a rainbow of people in its wake.

Chee Malabar says, "I'm not appropriating anyone's art form; to me, hip-hop is me. I was raised on it, I was informed by it, I participated in it. I'm not trying to be Black; I don't have to sit here and prove my "Indianness" to anyone. I was born in India. I learned English with hip-hop when I moved here [America]."

In the case of Karmacy, I find the "trying to be Black" assertion bizarre considering how rooted they are in the South Asian community. In fact, it is their greatest appeal and why they have been popular at large South Asian events such as Bhangra Blowout and the annual South Asian Students Association conference attracting thousands of students nationally.

I was now getting closer to completing the interview process with the various artists I had met. They had collectively raised serious and complicated questions regarding race, gender, identity, and the convergence of these issues in hip-hop. I now needed an element of contextualization for *Brown like Dat*, someone who could bring all these issues together and make it accessible and universal to viewers.

I met Nitasha Sharma through Chee Malabar. It turned out that in the coming weeks she would be speaking on a panel at Northwestern University regarding South Asians in hip-hop. I decided to tape the panel discussion and an interview with her in Chicago. At the time, she was working on her Ph.D. about Indian hip-hop artists and was studying all the issues and more that I was exploring in my documentary. Her work was original and a first in the academic world and can be found in this anthology as well. Meeting her and hearing her speak helped me to further shape the questions and themes in *Brown like Dat*. She was familiar with most of the artists I was speaking with, and she had a wealth of ideas and research to offer. She was a perfect figure to balance out the documentary; she would add credibility and of course the richness of her knowledge. The panel discussion was led by Sunaina Maira, a respected academic and writer. Maira's book *Desis in the House* explored the Desi youth scene and touched on similar issues. It played a part in my initial research for the documentary as well. The third panel member was my friend DJ Rekha, an artist credited with being a cornerstone in the Desi scene of New York. The panel itself was an encouraging experience; that it was in existence and these students cared about what this panel had to offer was significant.

During the panel, Sharma talked about how she addressed race in her work. She explains, "Wrapped in the question 'Why are you trying to be Black?' is inherent negative racism." In reference to the idea that non-Black minorities are still defined by how far they travel toward what is "Black" and what is "White," Sharma talked about downward assimilation. She explains that South Asians getting involved in hip-hop were seen as having gravitated toward Blackness and therefore "downward," illuminating the ugly racism infesting the community. Sharma shared a story with the audience told to her by one of the artists she had been talking with, and I later included this in *Brown like Dat*. Her interview subject said:

> I had just started college and decided to go to one of the Indian parties. I had never been friends with Indian people or known that many, but I thought I would try it. So I went to this party, and after I came home a couple of guys came by later that night. They were like "Dude, everyone's talking about you." I asked why. "They're calling you a rotten coconut." I was like, What the hell does that mean? "You know, brown on the outside, black on the inside." From that point on I was I like I am done with the Indian scene.
> —Nitasha Sharma's research, Northwestern University Panel on South Asians in Hip-Hop

After Nitasha told this story it was encouraging to see most of the students in the audience shaking their heads in disapproval. That artist's experience is only further evidence of the superiority complex that many South Asians have internalized as a result of the model-minority myth. It's a disgusting notion, destructive to communities of color coming together, and endangers cohesiveness within the South Asian community.

In tandem with the stories of evident racism, I continued to find places where change was happening, connections were being made between people, and progress was alive via hip-hop. Talking about Himalayan Project's first album, Chee Malabar told me, "Our first album was called *The Middle Passage*; the ancestors of African Americans when they were brought here that was called the Middle Passage." The historic Middle Passage is critical in the assessment of the African American community.[23] With the Middle Passage informing Himalayan Project's work, it enabled them to talk about sensitive social issues relating to both African American communities and Asian American communities. By effectively having shown respectful empathy toward other communities of color, Himalayan Project and their work is part of bridging the gap between South Asians and African Americans. Chee says, "'1964' [the title of a track on the *Middle Passage* album]—was the time of civil rights in America. Our rights, my rights as an Indian male, that I take for granted wouldn't be around." The connection being made here is incredibly powerful and a testament to the significance of hip-hop music and what it

makes possible. He is eliminating social boundaries between South Asian Americans and African Americans and creating a thread to bind them together. In his lyricism and message he is recognizing the struggles of the African American community and acknowledging them as a predecessor to communities of color in the United States.

There is a lingering feeling that South Asians and Blacks have little in common. Tension exists in this divide, and these notions of separateness and superiority are born from ignorance. Himalayan Project's contribution is beginning to eradicate this divide. It is positive education alluding to the shared histories of indentured servitude and experience of being a minority in America. It is a building block toward aligning the communities.

I strived for *Brown like Dat* to be a root of change and hoped that after people experienced it they would recognize the problems wrapped in a question like "Why are you trying to be Black?" and that the question would change. It could sound more like "Hip-hop being a culture born in Black communities, although since then becoming far more universal and adopted globally, how do South Asians fit in, and how and why do they get involved?" Someone might condescendingly call this "politically correct" or "diplomatic." I repeatedly heard that criticism while making *Brown like Dat.* However, I call it being informed and asking relevant questions with awareness and responsibility.

## What Does It All Mean?

Hip-hop music's adoption by South Asians is a movement, but by no means is it a cohesive movement; all these artists have their own reasons and connections to the culture. The artists I worked with and others out there may be South Asian, but, in regards to their music, they are hip-hop artists first. They don't allow their identities to limit one another. Multiplicity is possible; it is vital.

The South Asian identity in America subscribing to the model-minority myth has long been a product of social constructions built by dominant American culture, government, and South Asians themselves. It is a limiting notion that questions those who step out from its boundaries. Hip-hop has proved its capability to empower men and empower women to smash these constructs and redefine their reach.

The life and work of the artists of *Brown like Dat* is evidence of the alliances being built between communities of color and the importance of bringing to surface the racism, sexism, classism, and bigotry that exist in our communities. Only then can we rectify and progress.

These hip-hop artists are the forefront of a much larger movement to create presence and visibility for South Asian Americans in all arenas. Hip-hop is

an integral part of this movement. With the sharp and relevant social commentary delivered by its emcees, the healthy dose of rebellion, the unrelenting desire to burst from restraint embedded in this culture and its participants, it fuels progress for pressing social issues. It's a vehicle to help us constantly redesign "traditional" South Asian existence in America. The artists I spoke with and others are using their craft to reveal an emerging layer of this second-generation community that has the fire to rage against its skeptics and the powerful knowledge to make significant impact.

I completed *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop* in 2005. What began as a thesis project for film school turned into a relevant social exploration revealing a host of perspectives and experiences. It was an exciting time, seeing two years of hard work and collaboration come to fruition. *Brown like Dat*'s first-ever public screening was at Peace Out East, one of the first queer hip-hop festivals on the East Coast. It screened at Bluestockings, an activist bookstore and center in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I couldn't have been happier to be reaching such a progressive audience at my first screening. It was rewarding to witness a crowd of non–South Asian artists connecting to the documentary and most importantly finding parallels between the queer community and the South Asian community, both marginalized in the hip-hop world and dominant pop culture.

*Brown like Dat* screened at myriad festivals and led to many panel discussions and workshops around the country. The most exciting part was and still is visiting students at universities with this documentary. One of the first schools I visited was Northwestern University in Illinois. All of the students that attended my workshop early in the day were Chinese American and Korean American—not one South Asian American attended. I was surprised. Throughout the day, it struck me how universally the students connected to the issues and the experiences of the artists without drawing lines between their experience as East Asians versus the South Asians in the documentary. South Asian Americans are often marginalized in the Asian American community as a result of both a self-imposed isolation and exclusion from the greater Asian American identity. This experience specifically solidified for me the vast importance of South Asians blending into the larger Asian American framework to build a stronger sense of community. It was wonderful to see *Brown like Dat* bringing Asian American students together, embracing their diversity and their common experiences with hip-hop culture and the model-minority myth as sites of coalition. I realized that in addition to building relationships with Black and Latino Americans, hip-hop is a strengthening force within the greater Asian American community.

While talking to students and audiences of all backgrounds and experiences I realized that my choice to bring the lives of these artists into new communities through *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop* was overwhelmingly

rewarding. I was able to bring to the surface stories of those that had found their mode of action to affect their world, hip-hop, and were challenging destructive social constructions and stereotypes in universal ways that lead to progressive racial alliances and unity within South Asian and Asian American communities. In 2000, when I was just forming the ideas for *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*, I read *The Karma of Brown Folk* by Vijay Prashad, who is a well-respected academic and contributor to this anthology. The passion in his "love letter" to his readers and the South Asian community was inspiring and exhilarating. Reading his work and its influence on me was pivotal in my decision to make *Brown like Dat*. It was an important moment for me when Vijay Prashad watched *Brown like Dat* and in an e-mail to me gave it his seal of approval. I felt I had come full circle in my own work.

I hope to have encouraged others to find their own modes of action to affect change in their communities and question the boundaries, the racial tension between and within communities, gender inequality, class hierarchies, all the forces that threaten to hold us down collectively every day. I hope that a moment in this documentary strikes a chord with everyone who experiences it and sparks them to be fearless and contribute to redefining and erasing the stifling identity boxes we are constantly struggling with. I was proud to showcase such inspiring people, living their dreams, and, through example, helping others achieve their own.

## Later . . .

Since the idea of *Brown like Dat* was first born in 2000, change, progress, and visibility for the South Asian American community has advanced exponentially. In July of 2005, MTV Networks launched MTV Desi. Led by Asian American pop-culture supporter Nusrat Durrani, MTV Desi was an MTV channel dedicated to the hybrid South Asian American identity and its many faces. I worked as a producer for the channel, and three years after the completion of *Brown like Dat* it was exciting to feature almost every artist I had worked with on an internationally broadcast channel. Although only a few years had passed, when we began *Brown like Dat* a central, supportive place like MTV Desi felt light years away. It was revolutionary but sadly dissolved in February of 2007 in the midst of a company-wide downsizing and uninformed decision on the part of Viacom and MTV Networks. Now, the landscape includes myriad Websites, blogs, channels, and forums including Desi Hits, an online entertainment/lifestyle hub. The South Asian community in America is growing, evolving, and building supportive spaces in response to the contributions of its vibrant individuals. The artists of *Brown like Dat* and

the stories they've shared through hip-hop music and culture are part of this greater wave to collectively imagine and bring to life the vast, boundless identity that is South Asian American.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 48.
2. D'Lo. An excerpt of her performance for a Diapora Flow show in Minneapolis, MN.
3. Nitasha Sharma (paper presented at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.).
4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978).
5. Basement Bhangra is a monthly event held at S.O.B.'s Dinner Club in New York City, created by DJ Rekha.
6. Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 173.
7. Gayatri Gopinath, "Funny Boys and Girls: Notes on a Queer South Asian Planet," in *Asian American Sexualities*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 111–13.
8. Sabah Aafreen, "In Search of Self," in *Emerging Voice: South Asian American Women Re-define Self, Family, and Community*, ed. Sangeeta R. Gupta (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 1999), 50–53.
9. Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 78.
10. Nitasha Sharma (paper presented at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.).
11. Ernest Allen, Jr., "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 159–63.
12. Michael Quinn, "Dispatches," *TIME Magazine*, June 27, 1994.
13. Larry Bonko, "Meet a Couple of Letterman's Cronies," *Virginian Pilot*, March 19, 1997.
14. Michael Quinn, "Dispatches," *TIME Magazine*, June 27, 1994.
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17. William Eric Perkins "The Rap Attack," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 1–44.

18. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 157–80.

19. Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002*)*, 76.

20. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 167.

21. Sandhya Shukla, "New Immigrants, New Forms of Transnational Community: Post 1965 Indian Migrations," *Amerasia Journal* (1999/2000): 19–35.

22. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 179.

23. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 4–15.

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# 7

# Outcaste

*Murali Balaji*

I was never a cat you could classify
I'm the one you see running while u watch life passin' by
Asking if I dream at night
I envision my skills getting through across the mic
Tens of thousands listen to how I flow
How I show the youth to plant the seed that grow
No criminal record but I'm ain't afraid to tag the toe
Friend or foe you got to know
That the words of Mo you can go tell Pharoah
I live the path of two worlds
No time for get caught in the bushes with these triflin' girls
The mask I wear the smile ain't seen
Just make sure the knowledge don't land in the hand of the obscene
Kna' mean?
I came from outside Illadelph straight inside ya heart
Young minds I spark
So the light always be shinin' after dark
Rhymes prolific yo this is a start
My mind's always racing while competition's stuck in park

—Murali Balaji, "Internal Reflection" (2004)

One of the billboards for *Brown Sugar* begged people to "Remember when you first fell in love with hip-hop." At the time of the film's release, I tried hard to remember if I actually fell in love with hip-hop as music and culture. I *loved* it, but I was certainly not *in love* with it. In fact, hip-hop and I

have had a tumultuous relationship since I was about eight years old, replete with accusations of infidelity, abuse, and, most of all, the dreaded irreconcilable differences. Hip-hop and I have grown a lot in the last twenty years, but we have also grown apart, so much so that I feel I don't intimately know it anymore. While I don't need Erykah Badu screaming "Love of my life!" to remind me that hip-hop has played a huge role in my upbringing and my outlook, I shudder to think how an Indian kid from humble beginnings could become so disenchanted with something he had once loved so much and so hard. In order to explain that, I think I need to take it back—way back.

...

I think I "discovered" hip-hop around the same time I discovered that there was nothing I could do to change my skin color. I had always known I was different, since my parents had painstakingly tried to re-create a traditional Tamil Iyer household in the United States, replete with daily *pujas*,[1] idlis, dosais,[2] and customary South Indian beatings. I was bilingual and bicultural, and—though it only advances a cliché—very confused. At home, I was raised to be a good Brahmin boy. My parents and grandparents had captured my wonder of Hindu history, and by the time I was seven I was pretty darn good at recounting the avatars of Vishnu and making familial connections in the Mahabharata. I was also remarkably fluent in Tamil, which gave me the distinct privilege of impressing all the uncles and aunties who knew my parents while engendering resentment among their ABCD kids. I was so Indian at home it hurt. I even had a strong Indian accent to go along with the hand-me-down clothes I wore, which made it seem as if my parents had not only succeeded in making me an Indian in America but an American-raised FOB (Fresh off Boat).

While my parents fostered and cultivated my Indianness under their roof, my culture did little for me on the outside, a quaint hell known as Mariemont, Ohio. Most Mariemonters did not know that the South had lost the Civil War, or that Ohio was north of the Mason-Dixon line. Going to elementary school with kids who knew I was different and were determined to make me *feel* different heightened my self-consciousness. I tried so hard to be one of the guys that I developed a Jekyll and Hyde complex by the time I was in the third grade. My schoolmates would bully and harass me, calling me such endearing names as "nigger" and "homely child," so I put on whiteface to try to fit in. I shed my Indianness and, like my father, anglicized the pronunciation of my name. I thought resignation to my supposed inferiority and acceding to the whims of my peers was what I needed to do to find relative acceptance, or at least survive. Being White and American was the ideal—until I met hip-hop.

It was the winter of 1988, and my dad had just found a job outside of Philadelphia. Mariemont had traumatized me, though I would not fully real-

ize its effect on my racial outlook until much later. I was very self-conscious when I first started school in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. I wanted to be accepted, but I felt angry at the fact that I couldn't be myself around White people, always needing to put on a front like I was living a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem. Hip-hop was still a relatively unknown quantity on MTV, so rappers found other ways to promote themselves. I remember watching a clip of Chuck D. and Public Enemy, and though I was oblivious to their words I could see their anger oozing through the TV screen. The Public Enemy video struck a chord within me, privately moving me against the grain while drawing me to a culture that seemed to articulate my ineffable frustrations. Hip-hop began to stoke the anger inside, forcing me to introspect and take into account what racism had done to me. In the late 1980s, hip-hop seemed to reincarnate the voices of dissent that had propelled the Civil Rights Movement and the cultural revolution of the Vietnam War era. Public Enemy, the Furious Five, and Eric B. and Rakim were not only the leaders of a generation of frustrated urban Black youth dealing with White flight, inferior schools, drugs, violence, and racism; they promised me a path to my own liberation. But not all rappers focused on politics, injustice, and street life. I listened religiously to the campy and positive rap, including the Fresh Prince and DJ Jazzy Jeff, Philly's homegrown rap duo; Young MC, whose major hit sparked a major Pepsi ad campaign in 1990; and MC Hammer, who might have been a horrible lyricist but revolutionized the dance aspect of rap videos.

My growing affection for hip-hop was not lost on some of the White kids in my school, who seemed to revel in the idea of making me feel as puny and insignificant as possible. Some classmates had already begun accusing me of trying to be Black. Why wasn't I listening to Debbie Gibson and INXS? Who gave me the right to listen to Black music when it wasn't mine? I was too taken aback to offer any reasonable responses and too insecure to figure out if I really knew why I was so attracted to hip-hop. But as I began to understand how taboo hip-hop was, I became more emboldened to listen to it. After all, living in a mostly White suburb of Philadelphia in 1990 had crystallized the idea that I truly was a fish out of water.

Hip-hop also awakened my anticolonial sentiment. I remember watching *Gandhi* on television and realizing just how evil the British were. I became a voracious reader of history, and by the time I was in sixth grade I had accumulated dozens of books about slavery, British imperialism, and anticolonial heroism. I wondered aloud why we had to pay so much attention to Oliver Cromwell and never learned about Toussaint L'Overture. I had seen at least three films on Martin Luther King Jr., and every time I saw the assassination scene tears would flow unchecked. When Vanilla Ice came out in 1990, I joined the handful of Black students at my middle school to snicker at the White boy who was becoming famous off Black music. I really just thought Vanilla Ice

sucked, but the fact that he had become a platinum-selling artist almost overnight when Black rappers had struggled just to make it out of the basement burned me. I refused to listen to Vanilla Ice, going so far as turning off the radio whenever the Top 9 at 9 would come on, since I knew at least three of them would be Robert Van Winkle's.[3] Beyond shaping my musical judgment, hip-hop's expression of Black angst played a key role in my understanding of world society. I began to follow the anti-Apartheid movement and the international groundswell of support for Nelson Mandela's release. I remember watching television for three hours on a Sunday morning, flipping through every network to get as much Mandela news as possible. I also remember reading everything I could about the case of Charles Stuart, the Boston lawyer who had his brother shoot him and his pregnant wife then blamed a Black man for the crime. I was aghast at how Boston police could just pick up every Black man they saw for questioning. I even asked my dad, who, knowing my curiosity, simply said, "That's just the way this country is." The following year, hip-hop guided my antiwar sentiment. I didn't know much about Iraq, except that the United States had supported it during the Iran-Iraq War. I wondered why we were going after one of the "good guys." Whenever I would go over to my neighbor's house, we would turn on MTV and watch the latest videos. The hit song was a hip-hop remake of "Give Peace a Chance." Unfortunately, President Bush Sr. wasn't really trying to listen to Hammer preaching about peace, so in February 1991 we bombed the hell out of Iraq. For the next twelve years, we would keep Iraq toothless until President Bush Part II decided he needed to finish the job Daddy had begun. Still, hip-hop convinced me then that having a conscience and voicing opposition to the status quo—no matter how unpopular—was okay.

As I grew to love hip-hop, its message became clearer to me. By 1993, Public Enemy, KRS-1, Tribe Called Quest, and Dr. Dre were on my regular playlist, which I made by taping the radio. I hadn't learned how to dub, so I held a small tape recorder close to the radio speaker and recorded. Some of my favorite songs, including Dre's "The Chronic" and Das EFX's "They Want EFX," were recorded on five-year-old cassettes with bad loops. Sometimes I would record the song and the sound of my dad yelling at me to turn the music down in the background. Had I known house remixes would popularize the "garage sound" in the late 1990s, I would have sold those tapes. Hip-hop became my fix, and even though I could not relate to what the hell most of the so-called "grimy" rappers were talking about, there was a feeling of rebelliousness in the music. As I hit my teens, I began wearing baggy clothes such as Karl Kani and Cross Colors, which my dad would allow me to buy *only* if I found them at the clearance rack in Value City. Fortunately, I was able to do my fall school shopping in the "irregular" section of the discount aisles, accessorizing my new

wannabe-thug look with some twenty-dollar Nikes (courtesy of the Nike factory outlet in Perryville, Maryland) and oversized baseball caps. I looked so awkward in those clothes, but I *felt* so secure. Black kids in my junior high school would give me the "head nod," and for the first time in my life, I felt as if I didn't have to go out of my way for acceptance. By the end of 1993, I was playing the Wu-Tang Clan and Cypress Hill in my room, taking in the phat production and oblivious to their lionization of weed culture.

I decided that since the shoe fit, I had to wear it, becoming the Indian version of the "wigger" kids in my school. The only thing that I had going for me that prevented any serious backlash from my Black classmates was that I actually knew what racism felt like. I was picked on constantly by the White kids in my school for the way I dressed, the way I spoke (I still had a slight Indian accent, and because of puberty, my voice frequently cracked), and simply the way I looked. Hip-hop, on the other hand, didn't judge me. Its culture had seemingly embodied a multicultural utopia, allowing me to embrace the positive vibes of Tribe, Arrested Development, The Roots, Digable Planets, and De La Soul while letting me vicariously live "hard" through the music of Dre, the Wu-Tang Clan, and Tupac Shakur. Hip-hop personified rugged intellectualism, and I gravitated toward anything that allowed me to be smart *and* cool. But trying to achieve the latter without being typecast for the former involved more than simply knowing the words to "Rapper's Delight" or "Brenda's Got a Baby." I still had to shake this notion that I was a typical Indian since most of the Indian kids in my junior high school were bookish and insular. I had to *prove* that I was the exception, so I played football, nearly flunked out of ninth grade, and even started emulating suburban thug life. But while my initial efforts to be a hip-hop head were truly inspired by wanting to be a nonconformist, I realized my transformation from Murali the introverted kid looking for an avenue to vent his frustrations to Murali the wannabe was expedited by my exposure to mainstream rap. Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Snoop Dogg had brazenly taken the mantle of rap from the bohemians and freedom fighters in New York and seemed to remake hip-hop culture into a West Coast image. Instead of truly embracing hip-hop's bicoastal appeal, hip-hop followers began to form battle lines in the name of territorialism. New York may have invented hip-hop, but Los Angeles now ruled the Top 40 charts. I followed the latter, becoming engrossed in a culture I knew little about. By 1995, when Tupac was sentence to prison for a rape he probably didn't commit, I realized how far hip-hop had led me off the path. I felt betrayed. Hadn't I entered this relationship with hip-hop to grow as a person? Why had hip-hop promised me one thing and, without warning, taken me in another direction? C. Delores Tucker, women's groups, social conservatives, and police organizations leveled a litany of charges against hip-hop, which made me wonder how something

that had been conceived as such a positive instrument of social change had become society's villain. At the age of fifteen, I decided I couldn't trust hip-hop, not as long as I had to hear the likes of Ice-T, Warren G, Snoop, and even the New York idiocy of Ol' Dirty Bastard on the radio. We were going to go "on break."

For the next two years, I reinvented myself by changing my musical tastes. I believed hip-hop had failed to expound upon the anti-establishment message of the 1980s and was noticeably silent during the O.J. Simpson trial and its racially polarizing aftermath, as well as had failed to find a solution to the L.A. Riots. Though I still had some occasional dalliances with hip-hop—primarily with Nas, the Pharcyde, and this new group from Atlanta called Outkast—I had, for the most part, embraced heavy metal and industrial music. Some of my friends had convinced me that this was truly the music of the disaffected and had cultivated me into a music snob. If I heard it on the radio, it was sellout music. I replaced my Wu-Tang, Cypress Hill, Boyz II Men, Bell Biv Devoe, and Another Bad Creation tapes with Ozzy Osbourne, KMFDM, Ministry, and Pantera, as well as groups no one had heard of—and most of which I've long since forgotten. I wanted to send hip-hop a message. I couldn't love something that didn't remain true to itself, since I was having my own issues with "keeping it real." I had looked to hip-hop as my guide as I went through puberty—trying to balance two cultures and attempting to slowly climb the social ladder of my high school—only to find that hip-hop was undergoing its own identity crisis. Even Tupac, who had raised America's awareness about the hopelessness of many Black youth and who had championed the need to love and respect Black women, had become confused and gone astray. Pac signing with Death Row and becoming this commercialized gangsta might have made suburban White kids happy and Suge Knight millions, but it made me realize that hip-hop was no longer just the angst-ridden urban poetry that spoke so clearly to me. Hip-hop was now a moneymaking machine ruled by the whims of White corporate executives who saw the millions that could be made marketing rap music and urban culture as the corporeity of the White man's stereotype. Many Black rappers willingly traded in their lyrical reputations and their honest desire to effect social change through the music for big record deals, flashy videos, and glorifying the motto that would stick with rap: money, cash and hos. Tupac no longer rapped about respecting women or stopping street violence. He was now telling us that hos needed to be put in their place and that punks such as Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, and Mobb Deep needed to be hit up. The manufactured flaring of East-West rap tensions had now become hip-hop's chosen path to make its mark. Basically, if you were a rapper from California, all you needed to do was cut a record dissing anyone from New York or Philly, and vice versa for the East Coast rappers. Even though Nas gave me some hope that mainstream hip-hop

could still be revolutionary, I had become disillusioned with the new breed of bravado-oozing, testosterone-laden rappers—namely Biggie, Jay-Z, the Death Row Tupac, and Mobb Deep. Not to mention, female rappers spoke freely about fucking and whoring it up for any man with a little cash and much street swagger. In an instant, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and Roxanne Shante had been replaced by slut spokeswomen Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown. I began to think hip-hop and I were headed in opposite directions, both of us uncertain about where exactly that was.

Tragedy has a way of rekindling a relationship, and in the fall of 1996 I eulogized Tupac for his pre–Death Row contributions to hip-hop. I remembered how charismatic he was in *Poetic Justice* and had heard raves about his performance in the underrated *Gridlock'd*. Tupac's life of turbulent contradictions made me realize that part of me wanted to come back to hip-hop, at least to the music that had given me a voice. The following spring, I decided I needed to reconcile with hip-hop following Biggie's death. Though I never liked Biggie Smalls (I thought his music was too thuggish and misogynistic for my taste), I couldn't help but feel sorry for a man who became a victim of an industry-created image. I had seen interviews with him, and he just seem liked a shy fat kid with an amazing ability to put together words and build metaphors. I began to listen to hip-hop again in the spring of 1997, hoping that it could help me prepare for the next big uncertainty of my life: college.

. . .

By the time I graduated from high school, I was determined to reinvent myself thousands of miles away at the University of Minnesota. Though I had made some social strides in high school (I even made it as a Homecoming Court semifinalist), I was still extremely socially awkward, trying to follow what an alpha male in American society should do, hindered by the Indian conservatism that had been drilled into me by my parents. I started at the University of Minnesota a week after graduation, thanks to a minority headstart program that had matriculated many of the university's students of color. Taking two suitcases, a box, and my new *Wu-Tang Forever* double cassette, I flew to Minneapolis with no idea of Midwestern culture. Oh, sure, I had heard of *Fargo*, and I was aware of Minnesota Nice, but there was an exoticism about Minnesota I couldn't put my finger on. When I got to Minneapolis, I realized that the Midwest was about five steps behind other geographic regions when it came to pop culture. Puffy's tribute to Biggie and a song by some Chicago rapper named Twista were the most frequently played songs on the radio, and I had to put up with kids from Minnesota telling me that they could "feel" my "Philly style." To them, the East Coast was what defined cool, and even though

I was a quasidorky kid from suburban Philadelphia, I was the closest representation of that sort of cool. I took the opportunity and ran, speaking with a Philly street accent I had no business imitating and grimacing as if that was what everyone from the East Coast did. If it had to do with Philly and New York, I became the resident expert. Though I knew very little about the nuances of East Coast rap, I was now determined to read up on every new hip-hopper hailing from along the I-95 corridor from the Hudson River down to the Chesapeake.

By mid-summer, I had abandoned the industrial-music scene and had gone back to a full embrace of hip-hop, vowing to stay loyal as long as it could help define me. I had sworn off white women, promised to "rep" Philly as much as I could, and, most importantly, strove to exude my own hip-hop swagger. Ironically, the rekindling of my relationship with hip-hop also spurred my interest in discovering my Indian identity, a part of me I had so desperately tried to hide as a teenager. Thousands of miles away from Lansdale, I realized what had taken for granted: my "Indianness," my faith, my language, and, most of all, my family. By the first quarter of my freshman year, I sought to compensate for years of hiding my Indian culture by more actively promoting it. As a budding activist, I stressed the commonalities among Indians and other minority groups, especially as victims of affirmative-action backlash. Though I became a more devout Hindu and more strongly identified with being an Indian-American, I continued to stay away from other Desis. My belief at the time was that Indian Americans didn't get me, that I was so unique in my upbringing and my perspective that it would be almost impossible for me to make Desi friends who felt the same way I did. I clung hard to hip-hop, letting everyone know I was the enlightened Indian who was breaking down barriers with my ability to move with virtually any group. Blacks? I was a regular at the Africana Student Cultural Center, mingling with both African grad students and African Americans who acknowledged my hip-hop fluency. Latinos? I would become a founding member of the campus chapter of Sigma Lambda Beta, a Latino-based fraternity that embraced multiculturalism. East Asians? I freestyled at the Asian Student Cultural Center with self-styled Hmong hipsters and Vietnamese thugs, gaining genuine respect for my "keep it real" credo and by the fact that I towered over almost every other Asian student on campus. I even rolled with the Anishanaabe students, who opened the doors of their safely guarded campus clique to let me join them in railing against the White man's continued oppression against the "Rez."[4]

Despite becoming a self-anointed ambassador of Indian America to other ethnic groups on campus, I still remained on the outside of the Indian American community. I felt like I had no choice: ABCDs either chose the path of sticking with only other Indians, or they completely sold out and assimilated

(usually into Whiteness). I built my own barriers against Indian Americans, viewing them suspiciously and ironically adopting the same anti-Indian sentiments privately held by many Blacks around the world. After all, Indians have always been viewed as the suppliants to White interests, whether it was in the colonial West Indies or in Africa. Marcus Garvey despised Indians and light-skinned mulattoes in Jamaica and decided he'd have his own movement based on the politicization of skin color. Idi Amin thought Indians were no better than cockroaches and decided to expel them. In the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans in Queens frequently clashed with Punjabi immigrants. That anti-establishment sentiment branded in my conscience, I sided with Blacks in viewing Indians as self-segregating and aloof outsiders in America. As I would later write in "Internal Reflection," I was trying to keep a public face of Indianness while waging a war against it inside.

> When I look at myself I see my own worst enemy,
> I'm getting starcrossed by the images the media send to me,
> Say it again to me
> How the kid from the suburban lifestyle
> Look like he need to don a turban and get profiled
> It's the type of shit that make a Hindu get wild
> And want to blow it all up with my flow
> Destroy things and start over it's the only way to grow

Hip-hop held my hand during this struggle to be Indian and yet not be Indian, allowing me opportunities to immerse myself in Afrocentric and anticolonial thought during my first two years at Minnesota. To quote Nas, I became the Afrocentric Asian who had settled into a comfort zone in Black America, freely criticizing Blacks as much as I criticized other ethnic groups, including my own. I took a Du Boisian approach to Blackness, believing that conditions in the Midwest had forced Blacks to such low esteem that they had accepted self-hatred and denigration as routine. Borrowing from my lexicon of early hip-hop influence, I blamed the condition of Blacks in Minneapolis and St. Paul on the prevalence of slave mentality. I was ready to blame the White man, ready to challenge the system that had made Black men idle and ready to kill each other at the slightest beef and had drilled into the heads of Black girls that having a kid was sort of badge of hood honor—until I turned on the radio and found the culprit.

I began to argue with hip-hop again. How could you do this to Black America, hip-hop? How could you help me settle into a certain groove of being an Indian American Hindu with a diverse social set and at the same time tell Black people that it was their destiny to be inferior? My boys and I blamed the advent of Southern rap, which had filled the airwaves with Master P, Mystikal,

Mia X, and random other rappers whose lyrical skills comprised yelling and grunting over heavy percussion beats. Damn. Had Master P., the self-styled ghetto entrepreneur, and Souljah Slim replaced Nas, KRS-1, and Common as the spokesmen of the hip-hop movement? Was I doomed to go to nightclubs and leave early because a fight had broken out shortly after "Make 'Em Say Unhhhh" came on? By the end of 1998, I was ready to leave hip-hop again. I couldn't deal with the idea that though it was White kids who bought hip-hop music and culture it was Black (and other minority) kids who bought into it. Hip-hop, I thought, wasn't being loyal to me and the hundreds of thousands of other disaffected non-Black and non-White kids who were moved to action by its message. Now, hip-hop was ready to sell itself for booty-bouncing beats and lyrics no one outside of thug life could relate to. Thanks, hip-hop—for doing me wrong *again.*

...

I spent my final year of college at the University of Maryland–College Park, where everything finally came together: hip-hop, identity, activism, and professionalism. By day, I took classes in African American history, media law, and other fine liberal-arts subjects; by night, I interned for the *Washington Post*, which sort of made me a celebrity among my classmates. I made new Indian American friends who had the same ideas about race, society, and, most of all, hip-hop. College Park was a veritable utopia that seemed glued by hip-hop culture. Everywhere I turned, kids of all backgrounds had some sort of connection to hip-hop, whether it was the Whites who lined up outside of the used record store to buy Beenie Man tickets, the Asians who drove the customized Hondas bumping Q-Tip, or the Blacks who dressed like they had just stepped out of a Donell Jones or 112 video. Hip-hop made College Park function, enriching the campus with a diversity and common cause replicated by few universities. Most students and faculty had even become acquainted with the campus's celebrity, a Tupac-like figure named Lee Majors (it was his rap name). Lee looked like Tupac after a three-week hunger strike, and his bandana and military fatigues fit awkwardly on his skinny frame. Students of all backgrounds—nerdy grad students, commuter kids, frat boys, and curious freshmen—would perch by Lee outside of the Stamp Student Union, listening intently as he preached a gospel created in his own mind. Some affectionately called him "Cluck-U-Pac," since he worked at the chicken restaurant across the street from campus and often smelled of fried chicken. Lee became the pontiff of College Park, proffering views on society that seemed to reflect his eagerness to sound like a wise man but really only exposed his ignorance. Lee was deep in the sense that he was a benighted man who genuinely tried to dig

himself out of a limited understanding of the world. He was a crab in the bucket who was constantly trying to find a way out, yet he had also found a certain comfort zone at the bottom. If Lee was the corporeal form of my hip-hop idealism, then I sure as hell had been misguided all these years. Hoping that none of Lee's rambling philosophies would stick with me, I dismissed him as a quack and lampooned him as a caricature of what grassroots hip-hop had become: broke street poets hawking five-dollar CDs from the back of a chicken shack.

I used to make fun of Lee—until he offered me a chance to rap with him. In the spring of my senior year, Lee had conned—er, convinced—my housemates into letting him stay in our apartment. My housemates Mike and Yeneneh, who had hip-hop dreams of their own, figured this was their chance to make it to the big time. I had reservations but finally agreed after Mike made an emotional plea to allow Lee to live with us. Within a couple of days, Lee began to convince me that I had a future in hip-hop, that I could pick up the mic and actually *be* the culture I had lived for much of my life. I eagerly jumped at the chance to record some tracks on Lee's "My First Sony" sound system, which re-created an authentic street sound because it sounded like we were recording on a street. I began writing tracks and joined Mike, Yeneneh, and Lee to form The Calvert Hall Clique. The only thing worse than our name was our music. I recorded four songs, including "Corporate Bitches," a diatribe against the capitalist machine exploiting Brown and Black people and making us believe in a false democracy, and "Tan Skin," a ballad about being an Indian brother in the rap game. Yeneneh provided the raspy hooks to both songs, giving them a sort of R&B–rap collaboration feel. If only the songs hadn't sucked. Despite the poor production, Lee packaged the Calvert Hall Clique's "debut" into a mixtape that featured his hits (songs that usually sounded like a homeless man panhandling for a warm cup of coffee in the middle of winter) and made us some copies. Oblivious to how limited my verbal skills were at the time (though they were probably better than Mase's), I actually began to think of a career in hip-hop. I felt hip-hop had taken the form of Lee to lead me to my true calling as an artist, a brother in the struggle and the game who needed to help save real hip-hop from the materialistic and sex-hungry fiends who had defiled hip-hop's virtuousness.

I moved back to Minneapolis after graduation to work for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press.* I teamed up with one of my fraternity brothers, D. J., and formed a rap duo called M.D. D. J. hailed from Racine, Wisconsin, which probably suffered more economic loss than almost any other town in the Midwest. D. J. had a ghetto-tinged middle-class upbringing, and his hip-hop influences were Southern rappers such as Eightball and MJG, Chicago rappers like Twista and J. D. Williams, and West Coast lyricists like DJ Quick and Snoop. He had limited

appreciation for the East Coast, which is where my style complemented his. We spent evenings recording tracks that talked about middle-class angst, broken dreams, and basically eliminating any foes who stepped to us. We were both young professionals seeking an edgy image, buying into the notion that anyone who dared to dream hip-hop had to become "hard." Hip-hop had once again misled me, this time leading me into thinking that I had to be someone I wasn't. But I had become too blinded by the potential of our rap duo to be concerned with reality, taking on the rap name of Brahminprince and spitting rhymes like: "Me and D can go toe to toe and rock the best of shows / We write the most meticulous flows / Made to outlast foes and bang the most ridiculous hos." While we had fun in the "studio"—which was D.J.'s Pentium II computer with digital recording features—we also began to live like rappers. We stocked our freezer with a rap video's worth of liquor and hosted several parties flowing with booze and women. Brahminprince had taken over my social life, and for some reason I needed to start validating what I *thought* I was becoming—a bona fide up-and-comer in the rap game. At one point, I even pondered quitting my job as a journalist to pursue rapping, only to find out that D. J. did not share that desire. So we soon came to the bittersweet conclusion that we'd leave rapping to the professionals—or those who had more time on their hands.

The M.D. experience enlightened me about what hip-hop had become. Though I was angry at hip-hop for becoming a synthetic and visually based culture instead of a philosophical and lyrical one, I realized why it had evolved into its current state. As more money flowed in, hip-hop became more selfish and started to espouse the individualism of American society. Instead of promoting a counterculture, hip-hop merged with the mainstream, appealing to those it had previously rebelled against while lining the coffers of a system that put so many of us down. Rap music did not embrace the diversity of its listeners, the people like me who owed so much of our identity to it, choosing instead to love the one color that mattered: green. I realized why so many rappers had become caught up in this culture and why it was so hard to stop promoting materialistic excess. In a way, I forgave hip-hop for its faults and decided to move forward with my life. I simply began tuning out the crap that played on the radio and lost touch with the constant redefinitions of hip-hop culture. In short, I had become comfortable in my Indian Americanness and accepted the fact that I could never change where I came from or who I was. I was grateful to hip-hop for guiding me through the turbulence of my younger years and shaping my activism, but I didn't need to stay with it just for the sake of staying with it.

. . .

In recent years, I have been estranged from hip-hop. The message it sends to Black youth promotes degradation, misogyny, and slave mentality, things the pioneers of hip-hop fought so passionately against. Hip-hop has also misled many young Desis into thinking that its culture is only about songs with dope beats and thuggish lyrics. Young Desis have incorporated only the superficial elements of hip-hop, failing to look behind the surface into what hip-hop could have helped them become: culturally aware and politically conscious South Asian Americans. I blame hip-hop for believing its own hype and basically becoming a vehicle for a new form of slavery, the kind that shackles us to our wallets and makes us accept our unequal status in this society. Over the years, I have seen The Roots, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, Lauryn Hill, Mystic, Lupe Fiasco, and, to a lesser extent, Kanye West try to raise new awareness through hip-hop. Even Jay-Z, whom I couldn't stand in the 1990s, has used his undisputed clout to try to get more socially conscious hip-hoppers into the mainstream. But hip-hop and most of its followers (who happen to be mainly suburban White kids) are wary of returning hip-hop to grassroots politics, choosing instead to follow the moneymaking schemes of 50 Cent, The Game, and this new generation of "krunk" rappers from the South. Hip-hop—or should I say commercial rap music—to which I owed so much has let me down.

While it's true that I still love hip-hop, my feelings are akin to those of a person whose close relative has messed up in life: you'll be there, but you know you have to keep your distance. All the messianic bluster of rappers has muddled the fact that hip-hop's true beauty was its collective humility and its willingness to embrace those of us who were constantly outside the lines. I was an outcaste for much of my life, yet hip-hop steered me into a comfort zone that allowed me to be different and steadfastly against the grain. Thanks to hip-hop, I was part of a small group of Desis who identified with the Other America and believed that we must constantly struggle for our common humanity. Maybe hip-hop will one day realize that it can rejoin the struggle and usher in revolution, promoting a culture that embraces diversity and fosters mass dissent. Even if it doesn't, we who love or loved hip-hop will move on, determined to fight until we fulfill our quest for equality, empowerment, balance of identity, and (self-)acceptance.

## Notes

1. Prayer.
2. Idli and dosai are two traditional South Indian dishes.
3. Robert Van Winkle is the real name of Vanilla Ice.
4. Native slang for reservation.

# PART II

# 8

# Spoken Word

*Swapnil Shah*

THIS WAS ORIGINALLY SUPPOSED TO BE A SPOKEN word-piece, but then I realized what I truly want to get across to people and figured I might as well just say it. So, because half the time I'm the only one who really cares about what my lyrics *really* mean and because I don't want there to be any confusion about how I feel in regard to hip-hop, I am straight up telling you all the truth.

I am a thirty-one-year-old veteran of this game who has been "officially" involved for a decade. People ask why. Why did I choose hip-hop as an art form to express myself? Why not the piano or tabla or painting? The answer is because I didn't choose anything. I just lived my life, and hip-hop found me. It was the music of the people, the sound of independent thought and freedom. These were ideals I inherently believed in, so there were no decisions to be made. It's like when someone asks you how you met your best friend in the fourth grade. How do you try to recall something that has always been a part of you? Sure, there was a steady growth and a progression to where I am now, but no decisions.

That matter aside, the question that really irks me is, Why don't you give up medicine and do Karmacy full time? South Asian-Americans have such a negative association with the medical field because they think that everyone who becomes a doctor was forced to do so. They think it is a safe, boring profession that sucks away individuality and turns people into robots. I beg to differ. I love what I do with my time away from hip-hop. It is my passion. As far as I know you are allowed to have more than one, right?

So the bottom line is that I am an emcee: a solid, bona fide, lyrical poet who has some shit to say. Isn't that what every emcee is? That's the beauty of this

whole thing. Before there was the "music industry," and before people paid for their entertainment, there were emcees. Philosophers, poets, politicians. Fathers, mothers, storytellers. All people who had some shit to say. The true question, however, is Who actually listened? Whose truths and lessons were actually passed down through the generations? How many emcees just died by the wayside back in the day?

Furthermore, the rigid social structures of the past only allowed certain types of people to "get things off their chest." The difference and strength of hip-hop is that it does not decide who will speak. It does not force people to listen. It simply respects experiences. All experiences. A pair of seventeen-year-old African American teenagers can paint vivid pictures of life in urban Atlanta. A struggling Caucasian male can reflect upon the trials and tribulations of trailer park life in Michigan. A hopeful South African male can reach out to his township. A group of young South Asian American males can try to inject some passion into their people. There is no end or beginning to this list. Hip-hop not only gives a voice to people who otherwise may not have one, it validates that voice. That in itself is a monumental achievement.

One level deeper is the indescribable feeling that emanates in a room during a hip-hop show: the sentiment that everyone there knows and understands a special secret, a different way of life. This is the same feeling I get when I watch Barack Obama speak. The relief I experience when I am allowed to realize that there is actually somebody out there who can see through the bullshit and bring people together. That is what hip-hop has been giving me for years. It is the art form of change, of revolution, and, most importantly, of unity.

Now that I have spoken so highly of it, I must admit that hip-hop, similar to the many religions of the world, can cause its disciples to follow instead of understand. If not careful, one can fall into ritual instead of taking the higher spiritual path that hip-hop offers. This usually manifests itself into what I like to call "I only listen to hip-hop" disease. The only way to prevent this downfall is to repeatedly remind and force upon one's self that the underlying mission of hip-hop is pure, unadulterated open-mindedness. This will lead to exploration, learning, and eventually knowledge. Yes, knowledge. The forbidden fruit that will raise the worldwide legitimacy of hip-hop to the level it deserves. I am not speaking of economic legitimacy or even artistic. I am referring to social, anthropological, and historical legitimacy. The responsibility of taking hip-hop where it belongs and where it can be most beneficial lies solely upon the shoulders of those who truly believe in it.

# 9

# The Disjointed Artist

*Chee Malabar*

I came from a gray slum in the earth's far corner,
Where men are hemmed by superstitions, celestial stars warn ya',
'89 they was aligned, and we moved, to California.
Eleven years old; I was the immigrant poster child,
diligent, broke, uh, forced to strive,
in the course of life I've seen dreams through my folks'
hopeful eyes, most nights I hold mics and seldom socialize.
Developed this murderous work ethic, similar to criminals Cosa Nostra style,
You know this guy man I'm a focused thinker,
Been that way since my mama's swoll placenta,
Spent days in the winter, frustration pent up,
Dreaming of a warmer climate,
Sometimes I feel as though I was a primate,
'Cause its monkey see, monkey do,
And we all goin' apes for what it is that this money do.
Tecs and checks, they both weapons, just different tools,
I still rarely lunch bruh',
Pass on food and sniff glue so I can stick with this hunger

—Chee Malabar, *The Middle Passage* (Himalayan Project, 2001)

Growing up in India, the America of my imagination was one filled with images of Disneyland, long-legged blonde women, fancy toys, and assortments of chewing gum and candy. I hail from Baroda, a small city in northwest India, in the state of Gujarat. Although multiethnic and complex with caste, religious, and communal issues, India had not prepared me for the

visceral race issues that I encountered almost immediately upon arriving in the United States at the age of eleven.

My sister, mother, and I moved to the United States on Valentine's Day 1989, to be with my father who had been living in San Francisco for years. It was the middle of the American school year, and a month or so after our arrival my father enrolled me in a middle school in the heart of San Francisco. I was one of perhaps two or three South Asian students. The rest of the student body was composed of various South American students, Asians, Chicanos, and African Americans, all of them faces I did not recognize.

India and all its ways were still with me, and I recall fumbling through those days in an innocent and timid way. I found the public-transportation system difficult to navigate, and I got lost on the trains and buses almost every day for the first few weeks. Too embarrassed to shout and ask the bus driver to let me off, it took me weeks to learn that pulling the rope next to the window would alert the bus driver to make a stop.

Pre–Silicon Valley boom San Francisco was pockmarked with ethnic pockets that did not resemble the public face of the city that one saw on postcards in gift shops: foggy skylines, the Transamerica building, and ubiquitous hills with cable cars. I lived in a largely working-class area with Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians and had many problems communicating with them. At school, students mocked me for my "shitty clothes and sneakers," and for being an FOB, and for having an accent. This mocking often turned physical, and I got jumped. My previously held grand visions about America began to chafe like dry skin. Gone were the images of content White people pictured in movies and comic books that had shaped my racial view of America. I began to question my own place in this country. I wanted to return to India. I wanted to be among kids and not the men-children who spilled out in the hallways like marbles, cursing and fighting. While kids in India, like all kids, had the capacity for cruelty, I found my peers in America to be lawless and cold to the bone. There was a streak of nihilism in them, and coming from an essentially filial society I could not grasp how they could physically attack teachers, or how several of them, at the age of twelve, could get pregnant.

Around six months into my new life in America, a neighbor, who eventually became a close friend, took me under his wing. He was everything I was not. He was flashy and popular, and the girls thought him "pretty and light skinded." He told me that his father was an Indian like me, though he never knew him. His mother was Black and his family came from the Caribbean. In retrospect, I suppose he liked me because, perhaps, I provided some sort of link with his own past. What began as a friendship at a bus stop became for me an important introduction to my American experience—one filtered through a Brown and Black consciousness, one that spoke about things

around my city: violence, despair, and the immigrant experience. My friend introduced me to a way of looking at things for what they were. How else could I understand my new surroundings? How else but through hip-hop and rap as my lens?

I asked my friend to let me borrow his tapes, and I remember walking around my neighborhood with a Walkman and cheap Radio Shack headphones on, and the volume up, nodding my head to the percussive drums. I found myself drawn to the music for the rage, for the clarity, and for the unbridled nervous energy that oozed over the spare drums and deep samples of funk. I memorized the lyrics, not aware of what I was actually reciting. The understanding came slowly, over time, and when it did, it was a cold-water awakening.

> What's goin' on, America, it's your least favorite son,
> You know the one some beast mixed with East Indian rum,
> Hemmed, condemned to rent slum, tents in dense settlements,
> See my melanin's akin to a felon's sins in this, civilization,
> Where dead presidents replacing the God's you're praising,
> Jesus? Nah, it's just g's, churches is worthless, it's a circus,
> Clowning around ain't where the work is,
> We migrant workers, descendents of slaves,
> Ascended to a stage, beyond brave,
> Rendered a plague, civil rights came and went,
> And what's left?
> A few tokens molded hopin' they symbols for progress and for the rest,
> It's stress, no checks, credit debts is societal death,
> So what's bread?
> I ain't gotta tell you that it's kneaded (needed) dough,
> What we even breathin' for,
> Where most of us live, if it aint the slugs or drugs,
> The air's sure to kill ya'.
> I breathe the oxygen, cough a lung,
> Sit and think for my people hope my freedom songs get sung.
>
> —Chee Malabar "1964" (*The Middle Passage*, Himalayan Project, 2001)

Ice Cube taught me American history. Up until I was introduced to him, I was blind to the history and vestiges of the United States of America. I didn't know where Black people in America came from and more importantly how or why. Ice Cube, and later Public Enemy and Paris, answered all the questions I had.

Ice Cube's lyrics resonated with me. In India, I had attended a Catholic Missionary school, and for the first time I began to unpack the weight of some of

the subtle and insidious attempts by the missionaries to convert us. I remembered the images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, the forced mass congregations, and the forced singing of Christmas songs, all the while our own religious holidays and cultural events went virtually ignored. Their music blew my mind, and I began to make connections as to just how far the tentacles of racism spread. I started to make connections in the music with the day-to-day reality of living in an urban center. The mainstream news gave us one view with its depictions of the Black plight, but rap music had its own responses, its own world of codes and levels of understanding that were entirely self-referential and iconoclastic. It was the responsiveness of the music that I was drawn to, and the irreverence with which it treated the powers that be. The assuredness of Ice Cube in the early 1990s, the controlled rage of his music, provided a thumping backdrop to the Los Angeles riots, and the school walkouts that ensued following the Rodney King verdict, and it gave me new life. I was able to articulate my world through his. Growing up in India, communal riots were always a part of life. Now, here in America, the parallels struck me as familiar. Black versus White and Korean skirmishes replaced Hindu versus Muslim and Sikh ones. But, whereas in India there was no form of music that thought could articulate the times, here, in the United States, hip-hop filled that void. Classical Indian art was just that, classical and irrelevant to the situation that the country faced. There were no new modes of expression to translate experience and filter them through the times. Hip-hop was different.

While the anger and rawness of rap was magnetic, I was still years away from my own awakening as a South Asian male living in the United States. But, for the time being, finding rap music was like finding clay and water to make one's self new with.

San Francisco, often lauded for its culture, politics and commitment to diversity, had its own share of racial and class issues. Being one of only a handful of South Asians didn't make my transition any easier, but perhaps due to the Black and Brown neighborhood where I lived, or perhaps due to my newfound love of skateboarding and rap, I found a small niche among my peers.

I was still young, no more than thirteen or so, when I fell into everything hip-hop. Rappers proved that they were more than just storytellers for the dispossessed; they were true musicians. Groups like Hieroglyphics and Freestyle Fellowship were innovating new ways of flowing (the way you put the words together and deliver them) that were full of verbal playfulness and dexterity. I soaked it all in. Hip-hop back then was open to various styles and forms, unlike now, where many critics contend that the art form has been mainstreamed, sensationalized, and co-opted by big business.

Listening to groups like the Pharcyde, Hieroglyphics, and A Tribe Called Quest was a revelation. There was a sense of joy in their music that was in

marked contrast to Ice Cube or Paris, and it made me want to write raps. I began to write my own rhymes, mimicking other rappers' patterns and rhyme schemes. I scribbled them down on napkins and notepads, too scared to show them to anyone for fear of failing or being laughed at. I would write down entire verses of well-known rappers and edit and make tiny changes as I went along, making my own versions of their songs. The need to write my own material and express myself was growing in me. The classroom didn't much interest me, and I felt bored and stifled by the vanilla curriculum the school offered.

By the time I entered high school I began listening to everything from Guns 'N Roses to NWA. But my true love was rap. For my ninth-grade English class, I discarded Frost and wrote a paper on Ice Cube and KRS-One instead. I wrote passionately about the poetry that I felt represented me, and, granted, I wasn't Black, but then again, I wasn't White either. My friends were Black, Brown, or Asian. And we listened to the same music. It was in my ninth-grade English class that I met a kindred spirit, Ray, with whom I eventually formed a group called Himalayan Project. Ray and I had known each other in passing in middle school, but we immediately hit if off in class when I lent him my copy of Dr. Dre's *The Chronic.* Ray's family, although primarily of Asian descent, immigrated from Surinam. This twice-removed outsider perspective might have been why he was empathetic of my own experience. We spent the rest of the semester, and the rest of our time in high school, breaking down rap lyrics, making mix tapes, and trying to impress each other with our knowledge. This passion for hip-hop led to us making our own raps. We began battling each other and tested the other's skills. Ray's friendship provided for me then (and even now) soundboard. I could kick him my little raps without being judged. He was generous with his compliments, and he pushed me to keep at it, and I, in turn, did the same.

> I stalk the stage, gauge my mood, I came from caged slaves in servitude,
> Unnerving you with truth, I'm lewd like Luke,
> Text too complex to process, like Stevie Wonder with a Rubik's cube,
> Once the music's cued, I rip a (w)rapper like he's cellophane,
> Who swears he's fly, stuck on runways grounded,
> I take the fuck off like an aeroplane,
> Perilous game I spit, cause I'm skilled with the rhetoric, man,
> Run game like Edgerrin James,
> And dames who got hit, say Chee's so smooth
> He shot silk. Left 'em with a moustache like they did an ad for Got Milk.
> My quotes invoke Fatima prophecies,
> I drop degrees and slyly ease my creeds over the pope's script,
> Spoke this, in ciphers,

> The tightest rhymers say my name, Malabar, followed by "oh Shit."
> Mention the Son, Malabar's chants, man,
> I've been rhymin' since Christ was gizz in his fathers pants.
>
> —Chee Malabar, "Nuthin' Nice" (*The Middle Passage*, Himalayan Project, 2001)

When I reached my junior year in high school, I was on the bubble of failing out of school. My attendance had become spotty, and school became less and less interesting to me. I felt trapped in the classroom. It became increasingly difficult for me to focus. My school life spiraled downward, and I struggled with my anger. I felt vulnerable and unable to express all that I felt. I do not come from a literary tradition, and, although the written word was something that I held sacred, I could not enter the world offered in the pages of books like *Moby Dick* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Perhaps it spoke to my still-limited understanding of American culture outside of my immediate surroundings—the multi-ethnic inkblot where I lived. Perhaps I was self-conscious about my inability to transfer text into real-life terms due to my limited experience in America and the nagging language issues that came as a result of my recently arrived status. I became increasingly frustrated. This led me to read the dictionary every day. I memorized definitions so I could use them in the classroom. I did, often in embarrassing ways. The shame that came with these incidents led me to close myself off. I failed classes. I spent more time with fellow hip-hoppers in the coded language of rap music. I felt at ease within the music. It represented a language that I could call my own. I was becoming conversant in it.

Around this time, my home life became strained. My mother and I struggled with different things. Her struggle was to make us financially stable. My struggle was to feel comfortable in my own skin. Somewhere along the way, we missed each other completely. I knew that I was different. No one around me shared my background in quite the same way, and, besides, I was stumbling into manhood with no models to follow. My friends had "American" fathers and brothers. I had an immigrant mother and a nomadic father who was also struggling to make his life whole in a different world from the one he came from. He was fully formed as a man, though, and I struggled with reconciling him with my version of the "American Man," which was exacerbated by the fact that I rarely saw him. He had moved to New York a few years prior.

The "American Man," as I saw it played sports with his sons, spoke in a certain way, and carried himself with bravado. These notions that I carried about being a man came from television shows, or in the brief moments when I saw my friends interact with their fathers. My father was fully formed. He was a man before he came to the United States. He would not have to struggle with defining his true self as a man in the same way that I would. I turned to rap

music again. Rappers were strong and vocal, funny and menacing. And safe to say, I got most of my social cues—from how to deal with women, to my political beliefs—from rap music. The music didn't judge me, and it allowed me to be mad and bewildered, and still feel whole in a broken way.

The summer after my junior year, my life changed again. My father—living in New York and working to try and "make it for us"—decided that I was headed nowhere fast, and he moved me to the East Coast. I left my friends and all I knew of America up to that point. I was heartbroken again. I spent the summer by myself with my rap tapes. I studied everything that came out. I studied the different styles, digested all of them, and began to create a new version of myself. New Yorkers were much less interested in making party music it seemed, and more concerned with the human condition. The music matched my newfound mood: dark and brooding. In the meantime, I kept communicating with Ray via rap tapes that I made. We mailed tapes back and forth and recorded an entire album's worth of material on a four track. We kept trading rhymes, freestyling over the phone, and kept the soundboard nature of our friendship alive. We were a two-man craft workshop. That fall I enrolled for my senior year and spent increasing amounts of time by myself. I had nothing else to do but study. I had no friends, no outlets, just music. In early November, my father bought me a copy of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children.* I devoured it and found myself enthralled by the possibilities of language, of experience, of imagination. My raps began to change. For the first time, I felt that I did not have to be constrained by the books forced upon me. This was my first exposure to fiction that mattered to me. It spoke to where I came from and also laid the groundwork for my budding ambition to deal in words.

The move to the East Coast and the subsequent time spent in isolation had a deep impact on me. I became interested in books and found solace in fiction. It afforded me a world that I could retreat to and sift through for meaning. I found parallels that helped me navigate my mind's terrain. That fall, I decided to apply to college, having given it no more than a passing thought before. With my grades on the rise and a new appreciation for education, I was determined to finish high school by enrolling for as many classes as possible. As luck would have it, I got accepted to a university.

Exposure to further critical thinking at Penn State–Altoona, a branch campus of Penn State University, enabled me to view myself through a different prism, one that I seldom saw in mainstream publications and television shows. The years in college helped Ray and me to find material for our first studio album, *The Middle Passage.* Ray and I continued to talk throughout our college years, despite being on separate coasts. We were both growing intellectually and emotionally. As we became more serious about making music a priority in our lives, we began to see what our material would be. I had hip-hop

in my blood, and my thoughts circled around making creative music and being the best I could be; but in race-conscious America, Ray and I stuck out in a Black art form. Sure, many before us had been Latino, White, and even Asian. But many groups tended to shy away from their non-Black origins in their raps. Ray and I decided that to shy away from talking about our lives and our background would be falsifying our experience. We began to approach the music through a critical lens, one that ensured that we stayed true to the sentiment of hip-hop music, but we also embraced our Otherness and situated ourselves and reacted through the music to how we thought we were situated in America—as Asian men, underrepresented and emasculated. The music would be our chance to strike back.

Our first album, *The Middle Passage*, consisted of heavily sampled music full of chopped horn and piano samples. The jazz-inspired feel allowed us to heave heavy on social and political commentary that dealt with the failures of the Civil Rights movement, our own immigrant roots, and, ultimately, our life experiences. The next album, *Wince at the Sun*, was sample-free. Our producers, two very talented men, tailored a sound that matched the new mood of the country. The sound was organic and rooted in funk and dissent. The album dealt heavily with the social and political failures of the United States, as brought on by the second Bush administration. Being out of college provided me with work-force experience (and a paycheck that would help fund studio time and the albums), as I sought to strike a balance between doing shows, making music, and figuring out my place as a South Asian American. I worked for nonprofits and found that my musical journey and my work life were deeply braided. For the first time in my life, I felt free and able to pursue my work in a meaningful way. I worked on music in the morning, before work. When I returned home, I cracked open a beer and worked on music late into the night. My experiences during the day, working with young people from New York City, fueled my desire to make meaningful music. Ray and I released another album in 2007, *Broken World*. We considered the album our most personal to date as we tackled relationship issues, friendship, and politics.

The soul searching continued as I began recording my first solo studio album, *Oblique Brown*, against the backdrop of post–9/11 hostilities. I saw myself being targeted as a man of ambiguous origin in places outside of Philadelphia and even in New York City. I felt outraged, by not only my own experiences, but also by those that changed the lives of innocent people who were profiled by a raw-nerved America and the Bush administration. Once, after a personal experience, I wrote:

> I'm sitting at the station, cuffed to a cell,
> Surrounded by Browns and a cold steel smell,

Wondering why, we crossed the dark waters,
With its past slavery, exploitation, slaughter
Through the bars in the cell, COs tossing ham sandwiches,
Laughing, treating us like savages,
But America's built on inhumane pain
And I bet you felt safe when the Fox News came,
That Uday and Qusay Hussein's slain,
. . . to you we all the same
if you Black you sell crack, if you Brown you down buildings,
Timmy McVeigh did the same shit, ya'll killed him,
But you ain't trample the rights of your White civilians,
Didn't harass 'em, or ask 'em for passports, visas,
Didn't freeze their assets, no search no seizures,
While Bush is up on stage, quoting Jesus,
While the sons of the slums, cuffed up on trumped charges,
Cause we look different, talk different, labeled as Jihadists,
. . . back in the cell I'm nodding off to a drip,
from a tap, but this cats lyin' in his own piss,
awakens my sense of smell, I'm still in hell,
a day later saw the judge, ain't have to post bail,
got release on my own recognizance,
with a court date, no lawyer, shit ain't looking promising.

—"Oblique Brown"

Over the years, the themes in my music have changed. I have seen much of the country now, and I'm not as abrasive as I used to be. I have toured and performed extensively throughout the United States; I have met people with rich and varied experiences, and as a result the things that concern my gaze have changed. In the time since I first took up this music, I have loved, have lost love, and found it again. I have felt the pure joy of seeing my first album in print. I have lost friends and gained new insight into the things that make me tick. Through it all, the one constant crutch for me has been hip-hop culture, and more specifically rap music. And as I get older and begin to view my life through different prisms, the one thing that always brings me clarity is rap music. It has been the one permanent fixture in an American life of constant change. Its malleable nature, its ability to respond and to resonate with me, is one of the great gifts that America has given me. I feel humbled to have known its history and its life-changing prowess first hand. Hip-hop has enabled me to reimagine myself in a way that no other form could have. It has made me. I am a South Asian. I am an emcee. I don't make Desi hip-hop. I make hip-hop. My ethnic identity informs my music, to a limited extent. The music informs my outlook as a hyphenated American man of color. I don't believe that such a thing as Desi hip-hop exists. I have been lucky enough to engage in a

beautiful art form and to add a layer to the continuum that is the American narrative. All I ever wanted was to be a part of the dialogue and have a say as others before me have and others after me will.

Regardless of the monetary rewards that my music career may or may not bring about, I can say that hip-hop has been my constant caretaker. It has raised me and guided me in ways that my immigrant family members could never have done in America.

The last two years have been an awakening for me in many ways. Feeling that hip-hop music could not fully articulate everything that I felt and saw, I needed a new form. Writing fiction filled that gap for me. I began to own my background and my words and decided to write stories about those who peopled my childhood in India, and I thought about them in fresh ways and saw them against the political climate that I left behind. I began to read more authors who represented in some way the idea of the diaspora. This word has also stayed with me, and I do consider myself a diasporic artist: one who is always trying to get back to that fixed location, that permanent position, where the world makes sense. But, in attempting to do so, I am realizing that I can never fully return. I have become exposed to too many different modes of thinking, of feeling, and of translating. My influences, from hip-hop to literature, have made me a disjointed artist who has to rely on a borrowed language and borrowed cultural byproducts to make myself whole.

# 10

# Beats, Rhythm, Life

*D'Lo*

Art is the most effective medium to get a political message across to the masses. In this way, I believe that a campaign led by Jay-Z in 2004, coupled with Eminem and his song (with video) "Mosh," could have had a profound effect on November 2, 2004. The video itself was the most powerful statement that hit MTV, not because of it's anti-Bush, antiwar, "go and vote" theme, but because it was Eminem—the most listened-to emcee aside from Jay-Z. Though others might think this is overly idealistic, I truly believe that in 2004 we could have seen what would be considered a "miracle." I believe in the power of hip-hop as I do the power of those artists who consider themselves emcees. I believe that Jay-Z was at the height of his career in 2004, and I wonder if he, on Election Day, felt he had fucked up by not leading his listeners to the polls. P. Diddy tried hard to do it with the "Vote or Die" campaign alongside hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons and others who shared the same vision. While Diddy is known to make people move to his music, Jay-Z is known to make people move with his celebritized street-wisdom savvy. An intelligent rapper with an "only way is to hustle" mentality, Jay-Z has, over the past decade of making hit after hit, gained popularity with his flow, his bling, and his suave nonchalance. With anxiety over this new war waged for old yet precise reasons, with another four years run by a man (and his lackeys) who clearly lacked leadership skills and vision, the fate of America lay in the hands of the hip-hop nation. Members of a nation of many cultures, languages, religions, and ways of life listened to Jay-Z with rapt attention, worshipping his success and lionizing his accomplishments. With his iconic status unquestioned, Jay-Z had the world in his hands and could have literally "moved the

crowd" to action. Now, if Nas had the same celebrity, he would probably be able to move the entire nation to socialism or communism, but he doesn't. If Jay-Z did what P. Diddy did, putting out a statement against the conservatives' agenda (though P. Diddy didn't go that far), we would have been dealing with the lesser of two evils, if not another whole approach to politics.

Why do I believe this to be true? In the 1980s a little Sri Lankan kid in Lancaster, California, had her eyes glued to the movie *Breakin'* when it aired on national television. I know that witnessing this style and flavor was seeing a reflection of the vibrancy she herself held in her little boyish body. She knew there was a war going on in her parents' homeland and the way her father talked about it led her to compare it to the way Public Enemy spoke to Black folks. She stopped eating pig after hearing Monie Love's "Swiney Swiney," and I know that she will always remember "Ladies First" whenever she sees Queen Latifah on screen. Never mind the fact that Queen is a multimillion dollar enterprise; this Sri Lankan boy-girl from Lancaster, California, remembers finally feeling powerful being born into a woman's body because "a woman can make you, break you, take you"—and she was took. I, this little Sri Lankan kid in Sri Lankaster, California, believed and still believe in the power of hip-hop to move a crowd to action, to move a crowd to dance. I believe that hip-hop has the power to take a child off path and put 'em back on. I believe that if hip-hop has the power to make everyone pull out their hard-earned cash to buy a piece, then hip-hop can change this world. Folks like Kanye West and Lupe Fiasco have opened the door for mainstream hip-hop listeners to experience more truthful lyrics wherein consumerism and sexism are not the main focus; and now, I believe, the Hip-Hop Nation must listen, learn, and speak its mind on injustice, the state of the world, and the mental binds of capitalism. "Mosh" definitely did create a buzz with young people, but why didn't I find any of Eminem's comments on the actual video and process? And as far as Jay-Z is concerned, I had to relieve myself of my frustration by realizing that he is a hip-hop superstar who maybe knew too well the possible repercussions if he were to really lead his people, the hip-hop nation, away from what made him famous.

. . .

From a young age, I respected hip-hop's place in Black culture, but I also came to realize that hip-hop had a central place in my identity as a South Asian American. When I was a teenager, my Sri Lankan cousin Omkaran came over in his Cross-Colored Malcolm X baseball cap. I secretly envied that cap (hello! It was Cross-Color!), but I just felt that it wasn't mine—or his—to rep. I told

him that he couldn't wear that because he didn't belong to that movement. He didn't trip; he said that he could connect because all his folks could connect where he lived, in Toronto. I didn't really understand what he was doing; I thought what I saw him doing was exoticizing Black America. But he had heart and soul and loved his hip-hop, so much so that he felt he melted through the color lines, happily dark enough to enjoy his music and his new culture without being bothered by anyone who dared say anything about his new life love.

Omkaran's point of view made me not feel so guilty for being in the closet about my love for hip-hop. Hip-hop was my sanctuary, but because I'm not Black, I always wondered if it was truly mine. I grew up in a mostly hick town, but although we were surrounded by country White folks, the Sri Lankan community stuck together and re-created a Sri Lankan lifestyle that looked, smelled, felt, and tasted like the motherland. There were so many Tamil Sri Lankans there that we nicknamed it Sri Lancaster. All the kids grew up speaking like FOBs whether they were born on or off the island. Some never lost their accents. We kids didn't get KISS FM's Top 40 or anything of the sort. I got my R&B and hip-hop fix through television, namely *Soul Train*, where I watched people dance to the hits of Michael Jackson, Lionel Ritchie, the Pointer Sisters, Donna Summer, Stevie Wonder, and Billy Ocean. That moved me to emulate those dancers, to embrace the breaker life by any means necessary. It wasn't just about the music. It was *how* you moved to it, whether walking or dancing. And I tried to get that shit through my body like treetop grape juice. I practiced on the carpet and then, when I got good, on the linoleum kitchen floor. Appa swore that we was gon' break our necks. Said it from a doctor's perspective, almost condemning it for health reasons. So I snuck around busting moves I remembered from *Breakin'*. I was drawn to that style and that flavor. Learned to pop lock and do the millipede off that. Couldn't do the head spin, but so happily got close with the knee spin before a land. And of course, my comedic version: the butt spin. As the '80s progressed, so grew my immersion in hip-hop culture. In 1988, at 11 years old, I was all about the new show *Yo! MTV Raps*. This is why I say I grew up on East Coast hip-hop even though we lived in Los Angeles County. I mean, N.W.A. and Ice T had their videos, but the majority of the playlist was from N.Y. and D.C. (KRS-One, Public Enemy, Kid 'n Play, X Clan, Salt 'n Pepa, Queen Latifah).

And that's when I saw the parallels between hip-hop as a voice of Black frustration and the struggles of my own people. Raised in America in a Sri Lankan community, I heard the civil conversations and arguments around the civil war taking place on the island. I was the first American-born child in my

family. My worldview was heavily influenced by my father, who went from being a full-fledged Tiger supporter to retracting when Rajiv Gandhi was killed.[1] Additionally, my father's discourses on racism kept my skin sensitive to what was happening in the city we lived in. The KKK was alive and in effect there in Hicksville, so much so that trust issues kept our parents from allowing us to become close with White people.

Now with the influence of Public Enemy's politically charged lyrics in the late 1980s, I saw that music could have a message and create hope and change in a world of turmoil. Finally, I had a way to form my writing to match what I knew were urgent matters. My writing and rhymes reflected what I was taking in: my newly forming philosophies on life as seen through second-generational, bicultural, hip-hop influenced eyes. It was through my love for hip-hop that I was able to connect with the few others from different ethnic backgrounds (mostly Blacks, Latinos, and Filipinos) who also loved this music. We danced and wrote and hip-hopped together because we had to stick together; we couldn't afford to get lost in a sea of White.

...

While hip-hop gave me the chance to break down cultural barriers and become one with the struggle of being colored in America, it also strengthened my own grasp of who I was. Hip-hop gave me ownership of my ethnic identity, which allowed me to escape being thrown in and lumped together as just your typical South Asian. My experience, after all, was unique from most South Asians. Being Sri Lankan American, I didn't know much about India. Even though India is nearby, Sri Lanka is different altogether—a primarily Buddhist nation with island mentality and unique cultures and traditions. Trooping through the campus grounds of UCLA as an undergrad, I saw Indians flocked together at Kerchoff coffee house patio to get their "Indian" on. I still didn't know enough about India or its people. All I did know was that every time I walked through campus, I'd get stared at. Maybe they didn't mean to be stuck on my sight; maybe it was just a simple "She's Brown—why don't we know her?" It must have been weird for them. They probably looked at me and Raj Jayadev and that other raver Indian kid and thought, "Ah, the lost ones." We were the misfits who didn't fit in, didn't know each other, and didn't care about none of that really. Why did you have to be friends with other folks just because they were Brown-skinned of the South Asian sort? We three used to walk, solo, through the campus and troop down Bruin walk to the beat in our big-ass headphones. We weren't friends, but we acknowledged each other with respect, trapped by the music and married to the movement. To us, it wasn't about going to a concert or about wanting the life; it was about how we

listened, absorbing the rhythm and lyrics, jamming out to the way the message resonated in our bodies once it entered our Brown ears.

As I became more engrossed in the struggle and found hip-hop as the megaphone of my identity, the opportunities came knocking. I had just taken a class on South Asians at UCLA from Dr. Anibel Ferus-Comelo (a fierce South Asian woman scholar who worked with the UCLA labor center). Even though I protested, she urged me to start sharing my work with South Asian audiences. I didn't feel South Asian because I hardly knew South Asians and had no interest in Bollywood or Garbas or bhangra (though bhangra is pretty bangin'!). In addition to all this, I knew what tied me to my other communities—it was the arts, hip-hop, and spoken word, and I never saw any South Asians at any of those events at that time. Up until then, I was the one Sri Lankan cousin, the lonely ol' South Asian who was doing spoken word and hip-hop in different cultural communities throughout LA. I didn't feel South Asian because I was Sri Lankan, and we Sri Lankans don't see ourselves as even related to the mainland. Regardless, I trusted my mentor, got over it, and followed her advice. In 1999, I first performed in front of a South Asian audience at Desh Pardesh (now defunct), which at the time was the South Asian diasporic arts festival in Toronto, Canada. I was young, and I was the token: Sri Lankan Hip-Hop Gay Political Performance Poet. I know the reason for such a buzz around my performance was due to the fact that it was hip-hop . . . and maybe because I was Sri Lankan. Even though the term *South Asian* is inclusive of India, Burma, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, especially at these festivals, *South Asian* reflected Indians and specifically those from the North. The fact that I was representing the Sri Lankan American experience was definitely a plus for the festival circuit.

It had been brought to my attention that no hip-hop influenced art had come into the festival circuit prior to my performance. I knew then that this was the beginning of a movement, one that acknowledged hip-hop as a powerful force, defining and identifying the new South Asian face. With this acknowledgement was a need for legitimizing the areas that South Asians were getting creatively jiggy with it. The South Asian political and arts circles were finally open to understanding the incredible role of hip-hop in defining the lives of the next generation of South Asian youth.

South Asians who grew up in the '80s might have come into hip-hop as it hit airwaves and cable. Nowadays, we are dealing with generations of immigrant communities who have been raised with hip-hop, the culture, and, thus, a social if not political way of living. So as a part of the generation that came to love hip-hop as a tool of empowerment, I embraced its mission of speaking my mind. After graduating from UCLA with a degree in ethnomusicology, I came out to my parents as "a gay." To say that there was much resistance to

my announcement and lifestyle is an understatement. I packed my bags and headed to NYC.

...

About a year after moving to NYC, I had the honor and privilege of working with South Asian youth in Queens through SAYA (South Asian Youth Action), a South Asian organization dedicated to helping South Asian youth hone their leadership skills and creative talents through different mediums of art. As an artist and educator, it felt so right to be working with South Asian youth who *were* hip-hop. Fed up with the school systems in both NYC and LA and the lack of attention and motivational support offered, I was happy to see how youth were acquiring common/street sense and other veins of intelligence through the mentorship of the emcees they listened and looked up to.

In 2002, Diasporadics[2] put on the first-ever South Asian hip-hop concert at the Asia Society in New York City. Since none of the organizers knew many of the artists who were out there, I was called in to help organize but mostly to put together the bill based on my contacts. At this time, I was truly bi-coastal, flippin' between LA and NYC throughout the year. Thus, I was privy to what the two cities had to offer as far as South Asian hip-hop and R&B was concerned. The bill consisted of artist friends whom I had met and jived with at various South Asian art festivals. I had just met the brothers of Karmacy and Sumeet (an R&B singer O.G. from Canada), as well as Gurpreet Singh, a.k.a. "the tabla guy," a year earlier at Artwallah.[3] I had also met Jugular (beatboxer) in Toronto and got a lead on a male R&B vocalist—Ben Thomas—from Nimo of Karmacy. We made a call for submissions and accepted Raeshem Nijhon (dancer and later film maker) and Abstract Humanity (two younger Staten Island Pakistani emcees who came with some incredible political material). I pulled one of my mentees, Sheila from SAYA, to represent, as well. I also called in Nitasha Sharma (academic scholar who wrote about South Asians and hip-hop). There was a lot of hype around this concert, which we named Living off the 7 (*7* alluding to the train that went into Queens, a primarily South Asian area of NYC).

Never in the history of this nation had there been a South Asian hip-hop concert. This was sincerely a major marker in the history of South Asians and hip-hop. This event had artists finally connecting with other artists who grew up with somewhat similar backgrounds: growing up South Asian and with a sincere love for hip-hop and R&B. The Asia Society was packed that night with activists, artists, academics, and folks who were curious as to how the show was going to unfold. Follow-ups included round-table discussions about South Asian youth, the numbers of South Asian hip-hop artists on the rise and

the importance of their work and voice, to a South Asian response to 9/11 through the arts, including hip-hop. Up until this time, I had seen these artists present at North American South Asian festivals and events, but never had I gotten the chance to witness them under the same roof and in the name of hip-hop. It was mind-blowing as someone who had previously been isolated in my South Asian-ness because of my lack of connection to anything typically "South Asian." Again, this was the power of hip-hop: its ability to connect the disconnected and give those of us looking for a voice a forum to express ourselves. And that is powerful.

South Asians, like everyone else, listen to or revere hip-hop music and culture on different levels. You have those who are the music makers, mixing in samples of Indian music laid over some hip-hop beats. You have youth who get locked up on lyrics and beats of emcees that speak to them about the world *they* live in. You have South Asians who love mainstream hip-hop and feel—and sometimes imitate—the lifestyle: the bling, souped-up cars, and brand-name clothes. You also have politically minded South Asians who love and swear by the underground hip-hop scene. In my opinion, the discussion around *how* South Asians appropriate "Black culture" is pointless. Yes, there is a desire to imitate the hypermasculinity (more so than hyperfemininity) that is put out there by the rap moguls who are typically Black, due to the fact that South Asian culture doesn't rep a "cool" masculinity. But hip-hop is everywhere, held gingerly in the hands of people reppin' many cultures. Yes, we should never deny the fact that the roots have grown in and been maintained by Black America (nor should we appropriate words that aren't ours!). In this new day, however, South Asians have added their own flavor to hip-hop, as have the Filipinos, Africans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, South Americans, and other cultures. And we should never deny that hip-hop, because of this same accessibility and therefore marketability, is also a commodity-turned-money-making-machine created by venture capitalists. Aside from this sort of mutant ugliness, however, we see an important phenomenon: something that was born beautiful and transforms into further beauty as it passes through the lives of immigrant communities and other nations—a music and culture that speaks to the lives of individuals, utilizing the urgency and flavor of hip-hop culture.

Unfortunately, with the growing number of hip-hop-related events that are for and by South Asians, we are faced with one major problem. South Asian hip-hop artists, while able to gain notoriety and make a living off of doing South Asian/Desi–themed shows, are also getting set in presenting only to South Asians. Because hip-hop is experimented with and held in the hands of so many different types of people, the ideal situation is to create spaces for different and oftentimes difficult conversations to be engaged in through

performance. It's another bridge we must cross, carrying the mics in our hands as we prepare to expose ourselves to the rest of the world.

...

Hip-hop has done more than sharpen my identity as a Sri Lankan American. It has also provided an outlet for the other aspects of me: my sexuality and gender. Being gay and a woman is hard enough in American society. Being a gay Sri Lankan American woman rapper in a realm where homophobia and sexism are the standard, well, that's really a struggle. Even women have had a hard time grappling with the notions of feminism through hip-hop. I remember meeting this older Black woman at B-Girl Be in Minneapolis.[4] Keen to hear what the b-girls had to say, this woman came to the event intent on understanding by sparking up the conversation: "Isn't it kind of an oxymoron to be a feminist in hip-hop?" she asked. That was—and still is—a tough question to answer. I recall a time a couple of years earlier than this; Malachi and Anita and I were rolling back home from a show, the three of us scrunched in the front of Malachi's truck. I'll never forget it. Anita flipped through the dial of the radio, and I heard that beat. "Hold up; I like that song!" Malachi said nothing. Anita, being the fierce Bay Area sista she is, said "Ugh, D'Lo. This is terrible shit." It was Lil' Kim (that one song that starts off with "I used to be 'fraid of the dick, now I throw lips to the shit, handle it like a real bitch . . ."). At that point, I could've gotten away with telling her that it was the beat I liked, but I figured I might as well be real with my girl. I told Anita that I would rather the young girls whom I workshop with and the women of this world listen to this stuff than some ol' "my man left me, I feel so worthless"–type shit. With the misrepresentation of women in mainstream hip-hop and with the lyrics of some mainstream female emcees, there seems to be endless negativity attached to women in hip-hop. In my mind, Lil 'Kim was a *hero* for exemplifying what it means to be a strong woman in this rough society where walking the streets alone at night is a daily worry for all women.

One wouldn't want his/her children *only* listening to Lil' Kim; likewise, parents wouldn't want their children to only to listen to Jay-Z or Eminem. The bigger objective is that there should be more positive female emcee role models. Unfortunately there are not many. And, sadly, it is because the truly incredible female emcees are not accepted into the mainstream unless they have sex appeal, are straight-passing, and have embraced their roles as subordinates in the male-driven hip-hop culture. It is only once in a while that a dope-ass female emcee will be fierce enough to hang with the boys and battle just as hard. And what loneliness does that create? Thankfully, there are crews of b-girls and female emcees. However, the future of their success feels doomed.

The days of Queen Latifah and MC Lyte seem so long ago. The gender dynamics within this society don't allow for a space for b-girls to just be. Time and time again, men have been offered a space to write, battle, freestyle, and perform with or in the presence of each other. It's the same ol' "A Room of Her Own"–type shit.[5] A woman must have money and a room of her own if she's going to write, perform, and battle. It is only consciously organized groups of b-girls who look out for the b-girl, because it's hard to have that camaraderie otherwise in such a male-dominated art form.

That feeling of solidarity, being the lone voices in the howling wind, extends to my sexual identity as well. Dealing with homophobia on a daily basis can be mind-blowing enough, but using hip-hop—which has become another vehicle of homophobia—to counter that prejudice and the feelings of marginalization is profound in its paradox. And we as homos and queers in the hip-hop game don't even recognize that at all times. I remember a few years ago attending the Radical Queers of Color Conference at Yale University. We had been in workshops and panels all day, and so everyone was at the evening social to party. The deejay (queer too) was playing the dancehall hit at that time "Down with the Chi-Chi Man," which also refers to a burning of the "chi-chi" man. Dancehall and Ragga (based in Reggae) have been notoriously known to have extremely homophobic lyrics. Hardly anyone knew that chi chi man refers to a batty bwai, a gay man, yet they yelled with joy when they recognized the song off the first beats. They enjoyed dancing to the beat they recognized, even if they were unconscious of the song's message.

My sexuality has become as important to me as my ethnicity, and the two have often clashed. As someone who identifies with being gay and under the trans umbrella, often times I have been made to think that I can't talk about identifying with coming from an immigrant family. In addition to my parents being immigrants, they are also Hindu, and this played a huge role in my upbringing. My mother swore there were no "gays" in Sri Lanka, blaming the United States for how I "turned out." When battling, hip-hop emcees put each other down as faggots and sissies and punks. Even Kanye West noted that gay had become the opposite of hip-hop, that homophobia was so ingrained in rappers' mentalities that it was natural for them to dis wack shit by simply saying, "That's gay, dawg."[6] In retaliation to homophobia, a queer movement was born; subsequently, the need to share our individual bicultural, immigrant stories as gay people created a gay-people-of-color struggle. Our need to have a space to legitimize our ethnic heritages and ancestries alongside the fact that we were gay and lesbian and trans-identified folks was met. It is mind-boggling from the outside, but from the inside we understand why we cannot let go of our hip-hop, even if the culture, at times, does not want to accept us as part of the larger hip-hop community. I once tried to only listen to

progressive hip-hop, but I realized that I was isolating myself from the evolved rendition of the music I grew up on. Why was I doing this? Because it seems contradictory to love music that hates you. I'm sure there are many others like me who feel closeted in our enjoyment of music that seems to glorify hating women and queers. I believe that embracing the whole hip-hop movement means accepting the fact that another side of hip-hop exists, and we cannot deny it.

. . .

As I continue to evolve as an artist, I'm still trying to assemble and dissemble parts of my identity—gay, Sri Lankan American, Hindu, b-boi, hip-hop head, womanist—and merge them into my music. Sometimes, those different parts don't allow for one another, but I'm on a mission to make my unique voice heard. It would be the only way to honor that little Brown boy-girl who grew up in Lancaster with her ears tuned and eyes open to the struggle. I have waged an uphill battle my entire life. Though at times it is too much to handle, I have no plans of laying down the mic and giving up the fight.

Pains on my main frame of mind
I find bring me down around the ground downtown
or on this west side this best side of LA,
so I'll pave simple roads for those of you who'll follow.
Not for the ignorant heads,
I'd rather be dead than be one of them
I cannot spend my precious time or dimes
breaking down who I be as a free bee
and where I come from
to dumb dumbs
who can't feel me as a gay Sri Lankan
so I'll bump some knowledge
funky freaky hot 'n' heavy
you might boo me off this stage call life . . .
three strikes I'm out the closet with my wife
then you get scared as you like "How they dare?!"
be prepared as I move gigantic mountains
while drink'n continuously from her fountain
of strength the length I go to . . .
to make you understand that I'm not yo average woman,
I got this staff in my hand
and a whole group of homies right behind me, beside me,
I teach from da sacred books, try to control me . . .
creating caucaphonies of hocketing sounds

my army is loud enough to hurt harm and pound
on your ear drums as we strum
killing you softly with our lifestyle's reality.
I keep going, so please be knowin' my voice heads like arrows
the sparrow of life.
Strife, trife 'n' tribulations
all things are conquered cuz I am woman hear me roar.

## Notes

1. In 1991, former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a female suicide bomber while campaigning in the state of Tamil Nadu. The assassin was a member of the Sri Lankan rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

2. Diasporadics is a festival of South Asian art and activism in the United States.

3. Artwallah is a South Asian performing-arts festival held every summer in Los Angeles.

4. B-Girl Be has been billed as "a celebration of women in hip-hop," where female artists have learned to network and promote their skills. The festival takes place annually in Minneapolis.

5. "A Room of One's Own" is a Virginia Woolf poem, which stated that "a woman must have money and a room of her own to write."

6 In a 2005 interview with MTV, Kanye West decried the use of homophobic lyrics in hip-hop. He has been one of only a handful of hip-hop personalities to speak out against homophobia.

# 11

# Sounds from a Town I Love

*the1shanti*

> Here's a brief introduction of how nice I am
> tell your mother, tell your father, send a telegram
>
> —Phife Dawg (A Tribe Called Quest, c. 1991, "Check the Rhyme")

I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW A FEW THINGS going into this piece so that we're on the same footing while you read through my thoughts:

1. I don't see myself as a producer, rapper, emcee/MC, singer, songwriter, A&R rep, label owner, manager, marketing guru, enthusiast of emerging technology, or anything else I may fit the description of. I think in some cases I am a very effective contributor to something larger than myself (which at the end of the day I believe everybody has a yearning for), and in other cases I attempt things a little left of center, which don't garner as much money or attention but result in inspiring the next man. All that said, I just put in what I can when I can and leave it at that. Sometimes I get my just dues, credit, paychecks, etc.—and others, we (the people involved) know what the real deal is, and we leave it at that. If the adage is "You can't take it with you," well, then I guess my influence upon the work of the artists I will and will never encounter will be my greatest legacy. More importantly, I have a workingman's approach to my craft, and I am most happy when working.
2. I'm not the die-hard, hip-hop, flag-touting, card-carrying member that I can sometimes be made out to be. More specifically, I am open to extreme amounts of experimentation in the studio. I don't bind myself to

any particular genre, style, arrangements, instrumentation, or structure in general. I'm not referring to random noise, rather the various structures and timings that popular music may take on. In order to further my hip-hop career, I have produced and written songs for artists hailing from extremely diverse backgrounds looking to express their vision via their given genre. Among my many influences are Rick Ruben, Afrika Bambaataa, Prince Paul, Hank Shocklee, Quincy Jones, Bappi Lahiri, A. R. Rahman, Sting, Madonna, Dr. Dre, Common, Q Tip, and the list goes on. So upon reflection . . . maybe I actually am the most die-hard, hip-hop, flag-touting, card-carrying member whom you will ever have the opportunity to sit with, next to those whom we refer to as "legends" in this current time.

3. I am Bengali. I think I am Hindu (in philosophy more than practice . . . but Hinduism is defined as a philosophical study rather than a religion anyhow). I am not a writer.

It began with a fluke. I'll spare the details, but I picked up how to freestyle when I was eight years old. I was brought up in a household where it was well known that my immediate family were academics, and my father valued educational achievement above all else. Upon reflection, the beginning of the internal conflict that drives me can be traced back to an ability to paint well. I won a few of our school contests but then began working on "projects" for a few local nonprofits, community organizations, etc. Thanks to my father's insistence that I be well read, I carried books (unread) around with me all of the time. Thus, we have arrived to the grounds that the kids around me used as justification to beat the shit out of me. Repeatedly.

Rhyming became my personal form of Social Darwinism.

I soon came to find that the minds and egos of those who bullied me were just as elastic as the waistband they strung me up on the monkey bars from. I repeatedly told myself, "They can hurt me today, but I can leave them with skid marks in their pants for the rest of the year." From bathroom, to coatroom, to lunchroom—I could have everyone reinforcing the personal branding I was doling out to the student body . . . one bully at a time.

That's fat Matt / yo he's so fat
he came to my house / did it with my cat
that's Okay / but can I say
he likes pulling wedgies / because he's gay

I took to the craft well. I studied Public Enemy, Ice T, N.W.A., LL Cool J, Run DMC, and every other record with an appetite I could not suppress. Similarly, I balanced out my diet with Aerosmith, Bon Jovi, Cinderella, Guns N'

Roses, Bach, Beethoven, the Carpenters, Metallica, and everything else that anyone could have had similar amounts of exposure to. I chased it all down with a healthy serving of after-school TV and video games. I needed ammo. What's more, if I could somehow figure out a way to record these rhymes and distribute them . . . I would become timeless.

Since the age of eight, this has been the way I have viewed the world.

I did not grow up with access to a large South Asian community. There were, at the time, a number of Bengali families scattered throughout the metropolitan Washington, D.C., region, and we would all attend the annual *pujas* and house gatherings. I had one good friend from that community. The rest of my friends were of various backgrounds—rich, poor, average grades, G.T. (gifted and talented), young, old—I got along with everyone. I knew early on that I was no genius. For that reason I decided that I just wanted to make those around me happy and work as hard as I possibly could. Certain friends of mine could waste away their years in school without so much as lifting a finger and score perfect marks on their exams, while others could have been so much more had they simply tried. I saw myself lumped in with the latter half. It was due to this that I developed an insane work ethic at a very early age. It took four solid years of hard work to figure out that the songs I had been using as the building blocks for my skill set were recorded in a professional environment called "the studio."

I first stepped into a professional recording studio and got my hands on an SSL board at age twelve and immediately returned home and dismantled my tape deck in an attempt to find a workaround which would enable me to add multiple inputs, split the signal, and convert it into a multitrack recorder. It resulted in the loss of my first tape-recording device but also sparked an interest in figuring out exactly how to make what I desired come to fruition. It was the first thing in my life that I had truly *wanted.*

I had been working a paper route, which paid $20 every two weeks. A two-inch tape alone cost $60 a reel. I figured if I could conserve that money and put it toward creating a recording method that would enable me to produce tapes at home, I would be set. The studio owner had tipped me off that my collection of tapes and records alone were enough of a sample base to keep *him* working for months. Slowly, I amassed a collection of gear that would become my "studio." Hiding each and every component as they made their way into the house, I drew up plans for the workspace I would create in order to afford myself some time to hone my craft. During the next four months, I scoured local garage sales and pined away for a four-channel mixing console at Radio Shack until finally I had created my first setup, which consisted of the following:

(1) second-hand microphone acquired from a rummage sale
(1) belt-drive turntable

(1) boombox with "line in" capabilities (still very cutting edge during those days)
(1) secondary cassette deck (for bouncing mixes)
(1) Radio Shack four-channel mixer (used as the brain center of the operation)

The second phase of my plan was to form a group around the sound that I was cultivating in my bedroom. Our school ranged from seventh to eleventh grade. The last attempt anyone had made at rapping was a Vanilla Ice–inspired senior going for broke at a school rap contest. The way he was introduced to the crowd had become legend, a forewarning to those who attempted to assert any claim to hip-hop credibility. Although this contestant had "paid his dues," gone through rounds of competition, and even gotten the dance moves right while boasting of an entourage of "soul sistahs" (this was back in the day when rappers still danced), the announcer immediately pitted the crowd against him by screaming, "And now I would like to bring to the staaaaaaaage . . . Vanilla Ice and the Cocoa Puffs!" Game over.

I realized at that moment that for me it would always be about the details.

I decided to insulate myself. I produced and wrote the songs—I had a Black corapper and a White deejay/backup vocalist. A quick trip to the mall later, I had us dressed in matching outfits under the name "Kross Kolors." *We was all about unity, yo.* I pulled the strings. We entered as many talent shows and rap competitions as we possibly could, and one in particular panned out. It was upon entering the final stage and coming in second that the group's morale lost steam and we disbanded. My friends had tried something new, but I had caught a glimpse of the "good stuff" and craved more. Besides, I had a maniac work ethic and what fourteen- or fifteen-year-old (I was the lowly twelve-year old) in their right mind would rather perfect recording techniques than try and do the hottest new thing that was going around at that point: Get laid.

I, however, had been stuck on a few pieces of advice that Doug E. Fresh had conveyed before our first performance.

- Never get mad at the crowd. It's not their fault you're not having a good show.
- Nine times out of ten, it's the sound man. Don't be afraid to stop the show, let the crowd know you're working on giving them their money's worth, and publicly ask the soundman to adjust your mic. There's no value to a bad performance.
- You're young. Spend as much time as you possibly can honing your skills. Quick money and fame come and go, true talent will carry you for a lifetime.
- They don't call me "The World's Greatest Entertainer" for nothing!

Amen.

They say that the first impression is the lasting one. Doug E. Fresh provided my very first piece of validation. He was the first to clue me in that I could actually be going somewhere with what I was doing. Until then, it had been a personal obsession to train and learn every facet of the business around the music. At that moment, I was inducted into playing a larger role altogether. There truly was no other individual who had been doing as I had done at the level I have been doing it at since that time period. And that, my friends, is how I was "brought into the game," so to speak.

I don't share these details with you in order to self aggrandize. It is simply to establish the understanding that I may just know exactly what I'm talking about.

The nature of hip-hop is "here today, gone today." It is a single-driven market. What that means is large corporations find it unnecessary to develop an artist beyond one song. If something exceeds that expectation, great. If not, it's time to move onto the next artist, and due to the fact that the music in and of itself has barely no overhead in the creative process, there is no shortage of fresh talent.

Generally, that one song is given wide amounts of exposure, and the single is yanked from stores in order to force the consumer to purchase the full album. Not much is done in terms of developing said artist, or caring about what happens after that initial spurt of exposure. A song's promotional run is generally six to eight weeks. Here today. Gone today.

There are, however, exceptions to this rule. One key factor is innovation, the other deals purely with the business approach that is taken—and generally they are married to one another. Here's the secret: be as original as possible, do something nobody else is doing, and own the label/business associated with it. It's been done before. Think Def Jam (in its heyday). Think Tommy Boy (prior to it, being defunct). Think Rawkus (for the few years of innovation that created a legacy for backpackers). Don't know where to start? Track people down out of the liner notes. Diddy did it. So did I. What you do with the knowledge acquired is up to you.

When hip-hop was a young art form, it had a whole lot to prove. There needed to be validation that this music was more than looping up some disco breaks and floating some nursery rhymes here and there to color them. Pioneers such as Afrika Bambaataa, Rick Ruben, and countless others worked toward expanding the sonic boundaries in order to redefine the genre and give it a breath of fresh energy. From Kraftwerk samples to rock-and-roll-inspired song structure, these types of production-based artists worked to validate the musicality of the hip-hop. In addition, rappers like LL Cool J (believe it or not) took great risks in discussing subject matter that was not en vogue (i.e., "I Need Love").

In my opinion, we have come full circle. In 2008, there is a vast amount of hip-hop made out of the basics—the 808 kit and synthesizers. Nowadays, it is less about being inventive and more about owning the royalties associated with your own music. Fair enough.

To me, though, it's all disco.

Equivalently, Madison Avenue has successfully infiltrated the hip-hop model in that the payouts in the beginning associated with integrating brand identity into your rhymes were quite hefty. Over the years, the price associated with these branding ventures has lessened to the point where now it is *expected* of a young hip-hop artist to name drop brands . . . sans payment.

Nursery rhymes.

I get along with everyone—bling to backpacks, bhangra to orchestral. I love music for what it is. It is my one shanti. I also understand my responsibility simply in being who I am. Hip-hop is now a mature art form. Artists can now make quite a nice living off of making hip-hop music, and the culture has become a standardized vocabulary among youth worldwide. The fresh energy it requires now is less about structure and more about musicality. It is less about hardship and more about human experience. It is less about me, the emcee, and more about us, humanity. I feel the responsibility lies upon the shoulders of young artists such as myself—who have had commercial success and continue to release records that appeal universally. Sure, I make money. Sometimes, it *does* seem as if I actually *live* from club to club. There is, however, a world outside of it that is equally as exciting. Hip-hop has a past rich with the teachings of the human condition. I continually challenge my peers to discuss what makes them human . . . not just rich or popular. You may not desire to listen to those who have come before me . . . but in hearing me and the work I influence, you will be exposed to the tradition of hip-hop in its true essence regardless of what form it may take.

I am the1shanti. I be hip-hop.

> My tribe quests / to keep rap at its best
> it's the one shanti / fuck it—you know the rest
>
> —the1shanti (c. 2001—"Stardom")

# 12

# Words from the Battlefront

*Utkarsh Ambudkar*

To see the true face of any nation, gaze into the eyes of its youth.

THE RACISM, CLASSISM, IGNORANCE, AND PREJUDICES of a country's adults tend to be passed on to their children. Parents say something, kids listen and repeat. Now, not to disrepute their *parents'* geographical knowledge, but unfortunately *most* elementary school kids I knew in Columbia, Maryland, in 1990 couldn't find India on a map. Forget about explaining the difference between what I was and what those guys with the feathers on their heads were. Kids knew one thing. Bottom line, I was different. I looked different, I dressed different, and apparently I smelled different (was I truly a smelly child? We'll never know.).

The only problem for them was that they didn't know what to *call* me. Their young, 1990, seven-year-old minds didn't know the word Paki yet. They knew not Towelhead, and with *The Simpsons* still in its earliest years, they knew nothing of the squishy, slurpee, and slushie diatribes that today we all know and love. They did, however, know one word. A baaaaaaaad word. A word that, when spoken to me, hurt for reasons I didn't know at the time. A word that, I suppose, in some strange way brought me to *this* project. The word the kids in *my* school knew was *nigger.*

And thus begins my relationship with hip-hop. Now, I don't think the Black kids knew where India was on a map either, and I don't think they knew too much, outside of what I'd told them, about the intricacies of my South Asian culture; nor do I think they cared. They knew one thing. When I stood next to them, the "bad" kids didn't call me something different. I was a nigger to

them, too. Thankfully, we all know that not all kids are mean. I did have friends of all races and religions despite the hurtful acts of a few. So I guess that, despite being unknowingly placed in the culture already, as the years progressed it was the music that ultimately made me hip-hop.

My mom is the shit. My dad, too. From day one they had me listening to everything I needed: along with the kitschy Bollywood soundtracks, classical bhajans, and famous Desi playback singers of yesteryear like Asha, Lata, Rafi and so on, there was also Smokey Robinson, The Supremes, the Temptations, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Jackson 5, Roy Orbison, Ritchie Valens, Little Richard . . . man the list goes on! It was always oldies, and I loved them. I'm told I had bad asthma as a child and couldn't sleep, so my mom and my dad would stay up watching Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston videos on VH1 with me. The seeds for the good shit were planted in '83. So when '93 rolled around my ears were ready for what hip-hop had in store for me.

I mean, think about what was playing at the time! I'm seven/eight/nine years old and in the span of three years "rap music" goes from Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer—I was way too young for Public Enemy and N.W.A.(please, I wasn't allowed to buy my first Explicit Lyrics CD 'til I was like twelve years old which happened to be The Beastie Boys' *Check Your Head.* Anyway, we go from Hammer pants in *third* grade to Snoop, Dre, 'Pac, The Fugees, Common, Queen Latifah, Salt 'n' Pepa, A Tribe Called Quest, Naughty by Nature, Outkast, etc. by *fifth*! I mean this is a musical renaissance we're talking about! It's a place in time that was pure planets-aligned magic for hip-hop music. Why listen to anything else, right?

But then . . . *bam*! Nirvana hits, Green Day hits, Rage Against the Machine, Bush, Garbage, Live, Stone Temple Pilots, Soundgarden, Smashing Pumpkins, Marilyn Manson, and *boom*! All of a sudden we're going to the roller-skating rink expecting to hear Biggie and cats are rolling by singing the lyrics to Weezer's "Buddy Holly." White, Black, Brown, *everybody.*

So I started to like rock music more. *All* music more. With passion. With a sense of ownership. I was inspired by how many people were doing it all so well. I thought, "I will do this too." The combination of so many styles at the height of artistry and edginess in that timeframe gave me volumes of knowledge that I'm only now discovering as a songwriter. Those years of music before the deaths of Cobain, Shakur, and Wallace were the best of my listening life I think. After that, Europe blew up off the boy-bands, resulting in New Kids on the Block (but really New Edition) being cloned over and over again to the tune of billions of dollars in the pockets of the industry. Alternative became radio-rock, and in hip-hop an era of "bling" began and continued to gain momentum through the beginning of the new millennium. I stopped listening to the lyrics in rap records and started concentrating on how good the

beats were to keep my own sanity. Then I got tired of the same beats and pretty much just stopped listening altogether. It was all too much *noise.* I didn't want to hear any of it anymore. I wanted to make my own shit.

Unfortunately in the 'burbs you're not going to find that many people with turntables, let alone an MPC (a drum machine). Hey, if mad people in my neighborhood had turntables, I didn't know you but I wish I did. Everybody *I* knew had guitars, and grand pianos . . . harmonicas and banjos and what not, and some of them knew how to play real *nice.* So I started writing songs . . . well, I started making up words as my friends played. Just whatever came to mind in the moment. It was all free-singing, you know? Usually it was about girls. Hot girls, bad girls, evil girls, cheating girls, sexing girls, leaving girls, being left *by* girls, girls on the soccer team, girls on the field hockey team, girls in the drama club, and on and on until I had my friends laughing. That was the whole point of it all: make up some funny shit in the moment to make my boys bust a gut. But they weren't going to laugh if it didn't sound good while I did it. "It's only *funny* 'cause it's so *good,*" they'd say. So I got a just a tiny bit more serious and kept going with it.

With its improvisation-based style I naturally gravitated (or graduated) to the blues, and the blues is a funny thing because you don't always have to *sing* with the blues. You can wail with the blues and scat with it a bit and sort of, you know, let your voice linger a bit and do what it pleases. I liked that. I knew how to rhyme, and I had good rhythm, and sometimes I would just let go of the melody and talk out my little free-sings in my regular voice, just pulling on things from around the room. Logos on T-shirts, the type of jewelry people were wearing, or maybe some story everybody knew that had just happened. Stuff from right then in that moment—and people loved it! They were like, "Indians are smart *and* cool? Woah!"

They dug that I could sing, but the emceeing is what got them. I mean if I started to freestyle, the party was mine. I used to dance and the same thing would happen, but with freestyle you could incorporate and include everyone in the party. It would start with just me and my buddy playing his guitar. Then I'd start warming up the party making them laugh and doing fancy shit with my wordplay, and I guess the combination of skill and humor put them at ease. Then I would invite people to join in, and, many times, those freestyle sessions turned into fifteen-to-twenty-person ciphers, with every member of the party singing, rapping, beat-boxing, humming, oooh-in' and aaaaaaah-in', fingersnapping, clapping and all that beautifulness. It was then, and still is today, an *amazing* feeling for me to exist in that kind of a collective momentous, spontaneous musical and lyrical experience.

Around sophomore year of college, 2002, I decided I would take emceeing seriously. Not just party emceeing. Capital "E" Emceeing, that is, the art of

rhyme. I went back and listened to most of the important music I missed in my youth and started writing like it was my job. I spent a year doing that, honing my craft. There is, however, only so much you can do alone in your room or at parties with friends. At some point, the emcee must put down his pen, pick up a microphone, and test his skills the only place they matter: on stage.

I started to frequent an East Village Monday night open-mic event hosted by illSpokinn and Mariella at SinSin Leopard Lounge. The X.O., the house band, was always on fire, playing all the best beats live and uncut every week. At first I was wack. I discovered, when nervous, that I rap like Sean Paul. Initially this discouraged me, as I am not Jamaican; I am Indian. In time, however, I learned that the only real secret to rocking a stage is mic control, and with that knowledge my nerves seemed to calm a great deal. I associate learning how to properly hold a mic with becoming a successful emcee. I started to get recognized at freestyle Mondays. I sang, I spit, and I conquered. Why? Because I practiced my ass off. I knew how to implement the polysyllabic styles of Big Daddy Kane and Eminem, the call-and-response techniques of KRS-One and Doug E. Fresh, and being a huge fan of Bone-Thugs n' Harmony I had also spent many-a moon honing my ability to speed rap. I had no coast, neighborhood, or borough to rep. No storied hip-hop traditions of my people to continue. I was a first generation hip-hoppa, and my Desi status gave me a "chameleon card" in the game. All I had to be loyal to was the music, and I think that gave me a great advantage. With experience I became a good emcee. I had flow, speed, tone, and rhythm. What I did not have—and what I would need to become a *great* emcee—were punchlines.

The punchline is the main source of the emcee's wit. An emcee's *sound* is defined by the quality of his *voice*, his *style*, by his *flow*. His *skill* can be determined by his use of *wordplay* in telling stories, but his *personality* is found in his use of *punchlines*. As a party emcee and a live-freestyle emcee I never had much practice or need for punchlines. It became clear to me early on, however, that there was something separating me from the great emcees I saw: they had a certain panache to the way they won the masses. It was as if they'd once been just like me, pulling from the crowd and spitting to girls in the audience and had moved on to a higher plane of emceeing where content mattered more than crowd control. It was so much more interesting to both watch and listen. Since punchlines were not my strongpoint I decided to force myself to use them. There is after all one place where, as an emcee, if you don't know how to drop a proper punchline you are completely useless. It just so happens that on the first Monday of every month SinSin holds an "off tha head" competition in which sixteen emcees duke it out for $100, a bottle of vodka, and mad shine. It was time to step my rap game up. I began to battle.

An emcee battle is a sight to behold. Two strangers, hopefully equal in skill and swagger, versed in different methods and techniques of exuding lyrical machismo, face off in an all-out punkfest resulting ultimately in the utter humiliation and loss of public respect for one emcee and total adulation and showers of praise for the champion, all in the matter of thirty seconds.

I believe that if you want to be a great emcee, you must also be a great battle emcee. The competitive forum presents for the emcee a necessary test of skill and succinctness under copious amounts of pressure. I definitely sucked at first. I could rhyme, but I wasn't quick or witty enough with my punchlines yet. And on top of my lack of experience, my opponents had massive amounts of firepower at their disposal to use against me.

In my first true battle on the corner of 2nd Avenue and 5th Street, I was—in thirty seconds—told to drive a cab, sell a slurpee, and tell Saddam to come out of hiding. I came back with something about the guy's dreads. Ouch. Needless to say, his insults far outweighed mine, and, although it wasn't a judged battle, anyone who saw it will tell you I got whomped. That shit was embarrassing. I mean, one can make an argument that the guy was being racist and therefore his win was unfair, but the fact of the matter is, with all the Eminems and Jins in the world, I could only expect that people would attack my South Asian culture in their battle rhymes. I learned that no matter how good a rhyme I had, if the other emcee dropped even *one* semi-compelling punchline about my race, culture, or religion the crowd would go wild and take his side. I lost a few battles learning that, and then what did I do? I got better, man!

I was bumped out of my first audience-judged battle in the first round. I won my second. Then I pretty much reached the final or won every battle I was in at SinSin for about a year. How did I beat the Brown bashing? Well, for one, I didn't let any emcee say shit about my being Indian to the audience before I could. I would always drop a punch line I thought he or she (yes, despite my consistent use of he there are female battle emcees) might drop about *me*. For instance I might say

> You tryin to beat me? Boy what you on?
> You bout to get killed in the village by M. Night Shyamalan!

The crowd would go crazy because no matter how simple a rhyme I spit, the point was to let my opponent know I didn't give two shits about a stereotype. I was going to beat them, period. What always won the battle for me though was the mirror round because illSpokinn, the host and referee, ran and still runs a very unique battle at SinSin. There are four rounds, each testing a different skill of the emcee. The idea is to challenge the emcee to rhyme about

certain topics while still cutting into his opponent. It's not an easy thing for any emcee, no matter how experienced, to pull off. In the first round the emcees spin a wheel and are given a current event, such as the war in Iraq, or old-school hip-hop. The emcee then has to *stay on topic*, using his pop-culture knowledge against his competition. Many emcees have been booed off stage for not sticking to their given subject. In the second round, each emcee takes turns being blindfolded while the other picks out an object from the crowd. The object is then placed in the emcee's hand, and he has thirty seconds to figure out what the object is and use it in rhyme to dis his adversary. And then comes the mirror round.

IllSpokinn would say, "If you can battle another emcee you should be able to battle *yourself*," as he revealed a mirror that each emcee had thirty seconds to look into and come up with battle rhymes against *himself*. Well, with all the Indian putdowns and insults I'd endured over the years I had volumes upon *volumes* worth of punchlines I could use against myself. In thirty seconds I went through it all—curry disses, slurpee disses, Hindu disses, Muslim disses, taxicab disses, 7-Eleven disses, Apu disses. You name the insult and I hurled it at that mirror with joy and tenacity. It was as if all the years of prejudice and verbal abuse had been preparing me for the ultimate battle with my most difficult adversary: Myself. And let me tell you, I whooped my ass. The audience went bananas that night and every time I hit the mirror round. They loved me.

How did I feel, catering to stereotypes and racism for the sake of winning? Well if I didn't do it, the emcees I battled still would. Then I would be losing and getting made fun of by other people. Instead I was wining and making fun of myself. Putting the racism and prejudice out there definitely lead to strange circumstances, however. The Hip-Hop can at times behave quite unusually. It is where one finds unity in beef and peace in war. As in life, things usually work out as they *should*; it's just that within the world of hip-hop things always find the most bizarre ways of doing so.

There was a battle I won. I knew I would win fifteen seconds into it. I had the crowd. For whatever reason, that night they loved me. I had NYU kids cheering, backpack rappers hollering, and in the front row I had a group of fans from the Bronx, gully as all hell, supporting me. These dudes cheered the loudest for me as I stepped off stage having defeated my first-round opponent. They continued cheering after I had left the stage and in my honor settled into a booming, infectious chant that spread like wildfire throughout the club that night. As I sat down after my victory I began to make out what they were saying. They were chanting the word Al followed by the word Qaida over and over and over again. Al and then Qaida, over and over and over again. They did it every time I went up and chanted it during each round at the top of their lungs and each round I was declared winner. The chorus only increased in

both volume and vigor. "Al Qaida! Al Qaida! Al Qaida!" White, Black Brown, by the end of the night every last one of them was screaming it joyfully, with gusto. "Al Qaida! Al Qaida!" I didn't know what to do. I mean these people weren't dissin' me, they were *celebrating* me, but Al Qaida? Over and over and over again? I won that night and went home feeling sick to my stomach. The paradox was too confusing. Fortunately for me, the world of hip-hop thrives within the paradox.

The next month the same guys from the Bronx showed up at the battle again, and IllSpokinn told them to shut the "Al Qaida" stuff down 'cause I wasn't feelin' it. Despite how much love may have been behind the group's new catchphrase for me, bottom line—it was still just plain crazy ignorant (although, to be honest, I did for a short while consider coining the term *queda* as the a Desi-equivalent to the word *nigga* . . . I know). I expected my Bronx following to respond to my disdain toward their cheer poorly and waited for them to continue their chants of Al and Qaida throughout yet another battle. However, that did not happen. They still cheered just as loud as they did before, just this time without the Als or the Qaidas. I think I lost that battle in the final. Afterward I was standing by myself outside the club when the same boys from the Bronx approached me. I was a bit suspicious just because there were five of them and one of me, although I immediately realized I had no reason to be worried.

They told me they heard that I wasn't feeling what they had been saying and they apologized. They told me—these hard-ass-looking Black and Latino kids from the Bronx—that they meant no disrespect at all and were very sorry if I had been offended. They told me that I was the emcee they were lookin' out for and that they came all the way down to the East Village to see me perform and help me win. They told me I was their favorite emcee at the spot. I thanked them and explained my side of the story and how it felt to be labeled like that, which they understood. And like that, in a three-minute conversation, I made five new friends and everything from then on was gravy. I'm sure I could have ridden out the "Al Qaida" chant for a while, using the gimmick to win battles; but instead I stood by my beliefs and, through a healthy exchange, helped build a bridge between myself and my culture and the cultures of a group of fellas I may have never had the opportunity to converse with otherwise. I think it was then that I became a great emcee.

In no other genre of *life* is there as much potential for social dialogue, understanding, and change as there is in hip-hop. This is why I choose to *be* hip-hop. This, in many ways, is why hip-hop chose *me*. Because today among young people *globally* it is the most common cultural tie that binds, and by using hip-hop and its aesthetics as a tool for education, perhaps my generation, South-Asians and far beyond, will be able to rethink some of those old,

well-meant but misbegotten lessons our pasts may have accidentally left for us to unlearn.

My given name is Utkarsh Ambudkar, but some people call me Utkarsh the Incredible. I am a first-generation American of Indian descent.

I am Hip-Hop.

# 13

# An Ear to the Streets and a Vibe in the Basement

*DJ Rekha*

No book on South Asians and hip-hop would be complete without a contribution from one of the pioneers of the American Desi music scene, Rekha Malhotra—a.k.a. DJ Rekha. For more than a decade, Rekha has been in the vanguard of South Asian American music activism, making Basement Bhangra a household name among Desis and non-Desis alike.

Rekha's uniqueness comes from her atypical upbringing in Queens and Westbury, Long Island. Heavily influenced by the budding hip-hop movement of the 1980s, Rekha grasped the power of music as a voice for the voiceless and as an instrument of change. By the time she started spinning, Rekha saw the notions of music and politics as inextricable. As a deejay, Rekha wanted to combine hip-hop and bhangra to bring people of different colors and creeds to party and, more importantly, take home a message of empowerment. Through Basement, she expanded her community outreach and became both an icon in the Desi party scene and an inspiration to activists of all backgrounds.

Having performed with such music luminaries as the Roots, Outkast, Devo, and most recently, Sri Lankan–born M.I.A., Rekha has cemented her status as one of the premier figures in the Desi music scene. In 2004, *Newsweek* named her one of the most influential South Asians in the United States. She gained even more recognition last year with Basement Bhangra against Bush, a politicized party campaign that, in her words, was inspired to make people think while they danced.

In addition to her musical influence—which includes basement, Mutiny and Bollywood disco—Rekha has lent her name and support to myriad causes in New York and around the world. She has hosted numerous youth-outreach programs and is vocal on civil-rights issues. She has also collaborated with actress/activist Sarah Jones on her hit Obie Award–winning, one-woman stage

show “Bridge & Tunnel,” which examined acculturation issues in urban America.

The following is an interview with Rekha, who shares her thoughts about her upbringing, her musical influence, her activism, and her role at the forefront of American Desi music.

—Nair and Balaji

## The Early Years

I GREW UP IN A KIND OF AN INTERESTING PLACE, a place that completely informed my musical identity and identity in general. It was a somewhat atypical second-generation South Asian experience in that I grew up partly in Flushing, Queens, which was typical because it was a touchdown for a lot of people when they first come to New York. Kindergarten to fourth grade were very important years for me living in Flushing. There was a typical immigrant racism experience, but it was also very multiethnic—there were a lot of other types of Brown people of every color.

Then we moved to Westbury, Long Island, which is about thirty minutes outside of Hollis, Queens. It was a really interesting community, and where I went to school most of the students were African Americans. There were hardly any Asians, and there were no Indians, so I basically grew up in the Black community. The actual area where we lived, however, had a lot of division. There were the second-generation Caribbean people, who were from professional families and had White-collar occupations, and there were a lot of African Americans who were on public assistance. What had happened in Westbury had a lot to do with the neighboring area, which was called New Cassel. At some point in the 1960s they wanted to acquire Westbury School district to get more government funding. They did it, and as soon as they did it, they saw so much White flight. People moved out of the neighborhood. It was so interestingly and geographically segmented—this was the “X” section, and this was the “Y” section. There is an older Catholic Italian community, and there is the Caribbean American community, . . . and then there’s New Cassel, which was the hood when I was growing up (though now it’s being gentrified ironically). And then the people who were most picked on were Haitian immigrants. There were a lot of Haitian immigrants while I was growing up, as well as a lot of people from Central and South America. Though there was this mishmash of people, Westbury was predominantly African American. But I have to point out that there were also liberal Jews who refused to leave. That made for a really interesting mix growing up.

And that’s how I began to understand certain things about race, by living in the Black community and realizing the level of injustice and class politics.

Long Island is dominated by property values, which are ranked by newspapers. In that sense, Westbury is a really magical place; a lot of people came up here, grew up here. It was one of those kinds of communities where people had a lot of pride. I had a teacher in my school who lived in a White area, where the kids were so rowdy and disrespectful of their physical space. In Westbury everyone is so calm and chill, there was a certain family atmosphere that built the community—not that there weren't troubles. For example, a lot of people I lived with went to jail eventually. But in terms of the way Westbury was perceived to outsiders, what really caught my eye was the way *Newsday* would rank the community and the fucking impact it would have on people's self-esteem. Basically, our education was skewed by how much money was spent. I actually transferred schools for a year to this privileged Jewish district. I wanted the opportunity, and I went there, and I couldn't take it. I went there, and I was around really rich Jewish kids; the school had everything. But it just felt wrong, and I came back. It was actually interesting to compare. The town had to vote on school budget. If you didn't vote you couldn't get busing. Of course the people who didn't have kids who went to public school were adamant about voting. And they'd vote down the budget, so we'd get stuck with a low budget and no busing. And also *Newsday* wrote a big article about how you could buy crack in New Cassel. Everyone would jokingly call it "Crack Castle" or "Crackville." I first stepped into a professional recording studio at age twelve and got my hands on an SSL board. Afterwards, I returned home and dismantled my tape deck in an attempt to add multiple inputs, split the signal, and convert it into a multi-track recorder.

## "Hard Times" and Being the Invisible Woman: How Hip-Hop Influenced Me

When we first moved to Westbury, the school was supposedly bad. So I went to Catholic School for a year. And my sister, who was three years older, went for two years, and then we were put in the public school system. And it was a really interesting experience, because this was at the time of the birth of hip-hop. Being in Westbury, which was a short drive from Hollis, Queens, which is where Run DMC is from, everyone knew someone whose cousin was cutting a record or mixing something. I remember this friend whose friend was dating LL Cool J, and he had LL's phone number. So we would call to hear LL's voice on the message. I remember going to Fresh Fest in Long Island and seeing Whodini, LL Cool J—he only had one hit song at the time—and Run DMC.[1] That was right before rap concerts were banned. There were seen as troublemaking, which obviously had a lot of racial implications. And that's where I grew up, so it definitely had an impact on me.

But while hip-hop had an influence, it was all around me. Because of its pervasiveness, I think I was actually fighting to try to find other music because my race made me invisible in that context. And that was kind of annoying. Being at a small school, I also felt not very challenged intellectually, so I was kind of introverted as a kid. What drew me to hip-hop was politics. Somewhere I started listening to WBAI, which is Pacifica Radio.[2] And that really moved me, because I was about fifteen when the anti-Apartheid movement was in its heyday. All that stuff got me listening to conscious music. And in early hip-hop, the lyrics were really great because they *said* something. They were about struggle. Run DMC's first album was totally genius. I remember hearing it for the first time through family friends, who passed it on to me. And I was hooked. I remember listening to "Hard Times," which was really politically conscious, but there were also comical songs that were fun to listen to. But it wasn't just hip-hop that influenced me. After leaving Catholic school and then going to a Black school, I felt really alienated. I was also interested in alternative music. There's a great station in Long Island called WLIR. They played Depeche Mode. At home we got our dose of soul music. Though I really was into hip-hop, it was really interesting to be racially invisible in the environment where I grew up, whereas a lot of my peers in the South Asian community, who grew up in White suburbia, felt like they had to assimilate. In those places, they were really self-hating about being South Asian. On the other hand, I just didn't exist because of my race. But later, I was drawn to music through lyrics and the powerful message—that mattered to me. That connection mattered. There was a little bit of conscious rap, and then it got very frivolous. But in early hip-hop there grew this notion of free-art empowerment. For me, it would become manipulating technology, taking the turntable and making it my form of self-expression.

## My Evolution from Rekha Malhotra to DJ Rekha

Becoming DJ Rekha was a circuitous route. I actually was introduced to deejaying by my cousin, who used to live in New York. He was younger than me and grew up in India. We didn't have so much in common. But once we learned about our musical interests, we started connecting and connecting our music. We built a friendship around music, and somewhere down the line, we decided to form a deejay crew with some of our other cousins. They were the deejays and I was the manager, setting shit up. And it was fun. In fact, the first time I ever used a credit card was to buy deejay gear. At the same time, we started seeing these Indian deejays in the community, but they spun Indian music. I grew up around hip-hop, so I had a different approach. At the time we got started, everyone was getting into hip-hop culture, rhyming and battling, and I was like, "Let's do this." People reacted a certain way at first. I dis-

tinctly remember a friend of mine I grew up with came over. I showed him a setup. I was like, "Yo, check out my shit." And I never forget this—he said, "Look at Rekha trying to be Black!" And though it was a joke—we were very open with each other and grew up watching Eddie Murphy and there were very few things that were off limits—it was so interesting that after all these years he would say something like that. And my reaction was: "We grew up together, man! Since the sixth grade! We had the same experience. How am I trying to be Black?" It's almost like there is racial territory associated with music, which some people may argue that there is.

What happened to my cousins is that, one by one, they ended up moving back to India. And now some of them live in Australia. It came into question what to do . . . At one point Deepak took over, and then he left. By that time, we had a lot of gigs. I ended up meeting someone else through a friend of a friend, and we connected. It was my boy Joy who worked in NYC and helped started Basement. It was the right place, right time. He had a semester off and had a lot of time on his hands. He was trying to clear his head and ended up living not so far from me. He actually worked for college radio and was also a hip-hop head. He didn't know that much about Indian music, however. He was Bengali and didn't know bhangra, but we had that chemistry, and we connected. (He's now married and is a vice president of Citibank with a kid.) It was just time and place. Ever since I started working with him, things really started to sail. One gig led to another gig, and then that's when I really started learning how to deejay. After three years (and what seemed like a lifetime), Joy moved on. Then I ended up reconnecting with someone I grew up with, Phil Money. I used to see him around town, and he actually gave me my first lesson on a turntable. We started working on Basement Bhangra. We had such an understanding and an awesome chemistry, because we grew up together. We knew the same shit, and we had a similar vision as to how we were going to approach the gigs. Phil is in Atlanta now, but I learned so much from him.

## Black and Punjabi Music Merged in the "Basement"

When you start as a musician or as a deejay, you're just hungry. You take whatever. At that point, I was working with Joy. And we were part of the Desi party circuit, which was a phenomenon at the time. All the deejays did club parties, and we did private parties. Sometimes we would throw the parties and other times were hired to deejay. The clients were mostly professional organizations, and I specifically was told at least two or three times not to play Black music. Two things: I was specifically told not to play Black music and not to play Punjabi music. So that had really interesting racial implications when it came to Black music, but there was the economics issue with Punjabi music. Basically the party clients told us: "We don't want cab drivers. We want classy people.

We don't want that thug, hoodie-type [Hoodie was the word back then]." And that was profound because of this whole notion of fear of music—you know, like that movie *Fear of a Black Hat.*[3] At the time, hip-hop was not played on Top 40 stations. It was only played on Hot 97, and Biggie Smalls hasn't hit yet.

So, initially the idea of Basement Bhangra was more random. We got booked at a club with another band called Punjabi by Nature. We ended up playing bhangra and all sorts of other stuff. So the club asked me to come up with a concept for a party, and my thought was, I want be able to play whatever the fuck I want. My whole vision for Basement Bhangra was to play Black and Punjabi music because those are the two things I love the most. And so now it's like so not a new idea. In 1997, it was—honestly, even now it's still unique. I mean, if there is another party like what we have, I'd love to go to it.

## Music and Politics: Life Partners in the Struggle

As for mixing music and politics, I don't think they're separate. I did a lot of community-organizing work before I got into Basement. That's just a part of who I am. I don't think it's separated. I think the greatest goal of whatever kind of media is normalizing and legitimizing our existence here. And to me, that's political. To be profiled in any way as a woman . . . and also in the early days of Basement were really interesting. There were really interesting eclectic crowds, and it developed its own different energy. And the other thing about music and politics is that you can't shove it down people's throat. Then it just sounds like rally cries, and that doesn't achieve anything. With Bhangra against Bush, my goal is to get Republicans to bhangra. I want them to come to the parties, too. Because otherwise you're preaching to the converted. If you're a Republican or a conservative, and you come to the party, Bhangra against Bush, you have to deal with something political. It makes you think. And that's really what I am trying to do through those kind of events—just open minds and open dialogue.

## Taking the Message to the Mainstream and Where We go from Here

As for being a pioneer, that's a tall order, and I would not take any credit for that. When I got written up in real hip-hop magazines, that really put us in the context of hip-hop. Then I got recognized in the mainstream publications; most of the articles were *Timeout New York*, *Village Voice*, and stuff. I do think the goal of the party and where it succeeds is it breaks the notion of Desi parties as this isolated event. And it allows people who are not Punjabi who might

be South Asians and who want to be in a space where they don't have to be just one identity. The space is open enough where they can be other possibilities. And I try to support the space as much as possible. I do that in different ways, by programming weird shit early on, and just sort of letting the music take over. We had a fundraiser series for a couple of years, and that's where the politics comes in. We got this thing going and we constantly try to push the limits. Still, it was more radical when Basement first started. It's funny because I went to a friend's party on the East Side. You know, a nice professional scene with people in business casual, and in respectable professions—at this house party. And I got into a conversation with someone who was asking me about Basement and how it was going. And then he asked: "Yo, Rekha, but what's up with the thugs?" And he said it in a way that was like, I feel [Basement], but it's a little too low class. And I said, "You know what? Thugs have a right to dance." *What about the thugs?* That still sticks with me, because what's really been interesting to me about Basement is the level of class politics and even gender politics within the context of the party. That's the shit that plays in New York, where people have to always have a certain look. I don't think there is a right look, but that's just me.

Basement Bhangra is the most visible thing I do, but it's not the only thing I do. I have another thing I do, which is more breaking, drum, and bass side. Actually I've been doing this mix of bhangra, baile funk, Afro-Carib music once a month. It's a lot of crazy shit, but not in the world music, native informative kind of vibe. It's just dance. Just to have a career as a deejay, you're looking for where your career takes you. I hope to retire Basement gracefully. On the up and before it's past its prime. And then I want to do other stuff. That's where I see myself going.

## Notes

1. Fresh Fest started in 1984 and became one of hip-hop's most successful tours, launching the mainstream careers of such acts as Run DMC, Kurtis Blow, Whodini, and the Fat Boys.

2. WBAI (99.5 FM) Pacifica Radio promotes community activism and social-justice issues.

3. *Fear of a Black Hat* was Rusty Cundieff's 1994 "mockumentary" examining a hip-hop group's handling of stereotypes and race relations. The satire was critical of rap's excess and the music industry's glorification of the gangsta image, as well as society's negative reaction to Black music.

# Afterword

*Murali Balaji and Ajay Nair*

A LOT HAS CHANGED IN THE FOUR YEARS since this project began. At the time, South Asian Americans were becoming more actively engaged in the political scene, a response that was in large part due to the overt political and cultural Othering that took place in post–9/11 America. As the authors in this volume have shown, the identity games that Desis have had to play have often overlapped with larger cultural and political struggles in the American landscape. When Desis began to assert themselves into these struggles, they were noticed as both an economic and political force. Groups such as South Asian Americans Leading Together (formerly known as South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow) and the South Asian Journalists' Association worked actively in different ways and through different mediums to compel other Americans to know and understand the collective civil rights of the population.

The post–9/11 response by South Asian Americans as well as the "underground" Desi hip-hop scene that articulated the frustrations, hopes, and ideals of second-generation youth did not go unnoticed by corporate America.[1] In 2005, MTV launched MTV Desi, an attempt to commodify the second-generation Desi audience. As Oscar Gandy has noted, this kind of outreach reflected a convergence of advertiser interests and audience-member demands for representation.[2] Moreover, for MTV's parent, Viacom, the South Asian American audience was an affluent and largely untapped consumer base. In an attempt to sell Desi identity to South Asian Americans and convince advertisers that South Asian Americans did partake in consumer capitalism, MTV promoted the launch of its Desi channel extensively. Network representatives reached out to South Asian media and made appearances at South Asian professional

and social events, hoping that the second-generation South Asian consumer would find salience in the identities that were broadcast on the channel.[3]

Though MTV Desi tapped into the largely unnoticed South Asian American hip-hop scene and brought to the forefront artists such as Chee Malabar, Karmacy, MC Kabir, D'Lo, and the1shanti, the network also relied on an uncomfortable assumption about second-generation South Asian Americans—their willingness to buy into a homogenized notion of India. Nusrat Durrani, general manager of MTV Desi, raved to *Business Week* that the network "targets the bicultural kids who want the same experiences as other native-born Americans. They love Bangra but also Shakira; they've grown up with MTV but also Bollywood."[4] The contributors to this volume have articulated how Durrani's bicultural model for second-generation South Asian Americans is problematic. As this book has shown, second-generation South Asian Americans have a polycultural outlook, with perspectives shaped not only by mass media and dominant White ideology, but by their interactions with other subaltern groups.[5]

However, MTV believed that most of its viewers could relate to Bollywood music videos or bhangra countdowns and would pay the satellite television and premium cable subscriptions to watch. Instead, no one tuned in. Arun Venugopal wrote in his blog for the South Asian Journalists Association, "I couldn't find anyone who watched the satellite channel: no college students, no twenty-somethings with spare change. And it wasn't just me. All the tastemakers I interviewed—deejays, other music types—said they didn't know any Desi subscribers either."[6]

Without viewers to watch their programs or advertisers to help subsidize MTV's foray into the second-generation Desi market, MTV Desi went off the air in February 2007. Our hopes of broadcasting more diverse representations of South Asian Americans and articulating the Desi community's myriad ways of cultural expression were seemingly dashed with MTV Desi's permanent hiatus. However, not all was lost. Karmacy signed a deal with Sony/BMG Records, finally bringing to the mainstream a group that had entertained and educated young second-generation Desis for more than a decade. Moreover, the Desi hip-hop movement gained traction within the larger South Asian American community as a legitimate form of cultural expression and as a powerful articulation of identity angst. The South Asian American hip-hop scene also linked second-generation Desis with their brethren in Canada, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the diaspora. What the UK and Canadian Desi communities accomplished in the 1980s and 1990s, the United States was finally able to do in the mid-2000s. Through it all, the South Asian American artists who led the hip-hop and activist movement readily acknowledged their use of "Black" music, yet held fast to the idea that they were incorporating their sense of selves. If we take Stuart Hall's invocation that identity is a cul-

tural performance and production, then hip-hop has been an effective vehicle for artists—and their listeners—to negotiate the conflicts and consolidations of culture.

However, the South Asian American experience with hip-hop, both from a consumption and performance standpoint, brings us to a more complicated discussion about identity. Though South Asian Americans who are performing hip-hop as a means of resistance are, for the most part, members of the "hip-hop generation," their main references are fixed to a specific moment in the development of hip-hop and its performative aspects—rap, spoken word, and dance. The third space that South Asian Americans have occupied is not a fixed one, as both the community's demographics and hip-hop have evolved. This generation of artists—most of whom draw inspiration from the political consciousness of rap music in the 1980s—may give way to a new generation of artists inspired by the more commercially influenced rap of the 1990s and 2000s. After all, culture and identities, as Hall and Paul Gilroy have noted, are constantly in motion, changing subtly with every new interaction within and outside group frameworks.[7]

Which brings us back to the notion of hip-hop as both an articulation of Othered identity and as cultural commodity. The South Asian American rap and spoken-word artists we featured in this volume did not just use hip-hop as performance but rather as a forum for airing legitimate grievances that have come with the post-1965 community's struggle to occupy a distinct identity space yet also "fit in" with the larger American cultural, social, and political fabric. The use of hip-hop—specifically rap and spoken word—by second-generation artists not only articulates their sense of identity but also is an expression of resistance to Anglocentric hegemony. These are consistent with subcultural and subaltern practices, a means of countering dominant cultures through performances of self that are constructed as political.[8]

However, the success of the Desi hip-hop scene also has pitfalls, many of which are the same as the ones that African American performers experienced (and still do) in the first decade of rap music in the mainstream. Media conglomerates are no longer interested in accurate and dynamic representations of identities but performances that "sell" ideologies to audiences and audiences to advertisers. The failure of MTV Desi was twofold: it not only failed to sell its Desi brand—replete with stereotypes about who and what South Asians were—but fell short in convincing advertisers that the South Asian audience was one to be sold. The danger of falling for the advances of MTV is that the network colonizes and co-opts identities for a bottom line. In mass media, diversity is not so much a representational issue as it is a market consideration. John Fiske argues that "while the multiculturalist will talk of diversity and difference, the multinational CEO turns the coin over and talks of product diversification and market segmentation."[9]

We in the South Asian American activist and artistic community were collectively excited about the possibility of a channel that reflected *us*, so it's safe to say that many of us let our critical guards down as Viacom courted us with a brand that we could supposedly related to because it ostensibly reflected us. William Sonnega so aptly notes that by "'coming to you . . . wherever you are,' MTV thus identifies itself as a producer rather than an element of culture; a transnational corporate entity operating in a global rather than local societal matrix."[10] MTV's attempt to make South Asian American identity into a marketable—and narrowcast—commodity is not novel in the realm of multinational capitalism. This is why we should interrogate with urgency the different aspects that make up the expanse of the South Asian American community; otherwise, corporations will be more than willing to define who and what we are for us.[11]

We must be aware that our resistance can—and most likely will—be commodified by some corporate entity. Our words of frustration and our passages narrating cultural confusion and the subsequent clarity that has come through finding a voice can just as easily be used to sell a car tomorrow.[12] This commodification process cannot be avoided (we are all commodities in some way), but it can be done on the artists' terms if they recognize that their performance and articulation of identity is not static. Keith Negus reminds us that "culture produces industry" as much as "industry produces culture," but in the era of globalization, the latter has been more prevalent because of media consolidation and the narrowcasting of diversity.[13] We see images that may seem familiar to us on MTV, but it is increasingly apparent that many of these representations are mere caricatures of identity. These representations of what and who Indians are, broadcast globally on MTV Desi during its short run and on MTV India, remind us that our self-construction is often at odds with how those in power see and conceptualize us. As Vamsee Krishna Juluri notes, "The cruelest irony is that it is precisely this ease in appropriating the Other that is bandied about to signify the wonders of globalization."[14]

The MTV Desi experiment encapsulated both the hopes and the fears of the South Asian American activist/artist movement, that their voices would be heard but not made into commercial commodities. It's a fine balance and a luxury that the current neoliberal media structure does not afford us. Our proximity to hip-hop and our identification with the racialized Other may be a lived experience of a minority within a minority, but it would be foolish to universalize or "authenticate" that experience, as MTV Desi tried to do. Whether MTV makes another attempt at commodifying "Desiness" remains to be seen; other media conglomerates will continue to find new and innovative ways to define and commodify marginalized minority groups under the guise of "authentic" identity.

The polyvalent voices of our community are a treasure and need to be encouraged in order to reflect the expanse of South Asian America. We hope this anthology encourages our youth to continue to breathe life into our community. We hope the artists, activists, and academics featured in this book inspire Desis and others to play an active and generative role in our dynamic community. We need to embrace the binaries of our identities and everything in between; as Maxine Hong Kingston notes, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes."[15] The socially contrived meaning and paradoxical nature of our racial identity is confronted by Desi Rap. Our voices and actions ultimately yield a kaleidoscope critique of our racial ambiguity and invisibility; we are empowered to evoke our multiplicity through action, reflection, debate, and dialogue.

## Notes

1. See Murali Balaji, "Desi Hip-Hop," *Little India* (October 2006): 23–27.

2. See Oscar H. Gandy Jr., "Race, Ethnicity and the Segmentation of Media Markets," in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds). *Mass Media and Society*, 3rd edition London and New York: Arnold, 2000, 44–69.

3. See Murali Balaji, "When the Music Stopped," *Little India* (March 2007): 48.

4. Brad Nemer, "How MTV Channels Innovation," *BusinessWeek* (November 6, 2006).

5. See Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000).

6. Arun Venugopal, "Obit: MTV Desi." Comment on South Asian Journalists Association forum, available from www.sajaforum.org/2007/02/obit_mtv_desi.html.

7. See Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, "British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity," in Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (eds.) *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 223–39.

8. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1981 and 2002); Nitasha Sharma, "Claiming Space, Making Race: Second Generation South Asian American Hip Hop Artists" (Ph.D. diss., University of California–Santa Barbara, 2004). Also see Gregory Dietrich, "Desi Music Vibes: The Performance of Indian Youth Culture in Chicago," *Asian Music* 31 (Autumn 1999–Winter 2000): 35–61.

9. John Fiske, "National, Local? Some Problems of Culture in a Postmodern Word," *The Velvet Light Trap* 40 (1997): 59.

10. William Sonnega, "Morphing Borders: The Remanence of MTV," *The Drama Review* 39 (Spring, 1995), 45–61.

11. Gandy Jr. "Race, Ethnicity and the Segmentation of Media Markets."

12. In 2005, Sri Lankan artist M.I.A.'s song "Galang" was used in a Honda advertisement.

13. See Keith Negus, "The Business of Rap: Between the Street and the Executive Suite," in M. Forman and M. A. Neal (eds.) *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 525–40); and Keith Negus, "Cultural Production and the Corporation: Musical Genres and the Strategic Management of Creativity in the U.S. Recording Industry," *Media, Culture & Society* 20 (1998): 359–79.

14. Vamsee Krishna Juluri, "Why MTV Digs India?" *IndiaStar*, available from www.indiastar.com/juluri.

15. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

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# Index


Aafreen, Sabah, 85
AAU. *See* Asian Americans United
Abstract Vision/Humanity, 21, 86, 93; against Model-Minority Myth, 94, 95
activism: Basement for, xiii; community organizations for, 8; hip-hop and, viii, xii; as identity, 13; Nair on, xi. *See also* Raptivism; Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement; 2002 Diasporadics
affirmative action, 20
African Americans: culture of, 49; South Asian Americans v., x. *See also* Blacks; "wiggers"
*Afro-Asian Crosscurrents in Contemporary Hip Hop* (Hisama), 34
age: class and, 58–59; music/race and, 58
Aguilar-San Juan, Karin, 13
alienation: class and, 63–64; Malabar on, xii; social-psychological, 63; structural, 63
Allen, Robert, 7–8
Ambudkar, Utkarsh, xii–xiii, 89–90; in documentary, 99
Amin, Idi, 117
Apache Indian, ix
Apna Ghar, 11
art, 13–14; for politics, 137–38
artists, 25, 28, 30n13, 30n16. *See also specific hip-hop artists*
Artwallah, 147n3
Asian Americans, 54–56; assimilation models for, 19; Blacks v., 20, 21, 24–25, 34; citizenship for, 66m8; genetics of, 37; labor's needs for, 37. *See also* Black/South Asian relations
Asian American studies, 34–35
Asian Americans United (AAU), 39n5
assimilation: Blacks v., 20; models, 19; race/ethnicity in, 20
authenticity, politics of, 54
*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 75

Baby Face, 61
Badu, Erykah, 110
Balaji, Murali, xi, xiii, 109–21
Bangladesh. *See* Mujibur; Sirajul
Basement. *See* Basement Bhangra
Basement Bhangra, xii, 43–44, 83, 105n5, 167–69
Bella, 22
belly dancing, 65n2

"Beyond This," 27–28
B-Girl Be, 147n4
bhangra (Punjabi dance), xiii, 22, 41
bhangra remix, 66n10; Chicago v. New York, 43; for subcultural affiliation, 46–47
the Birmingham school, 46, 64
Black Ark studio, 6
Blackness, for machismo, 50
Blacks: Asian Americans v., 20, 21, 24–25, 34; assimilation v., 20; ethnic identity with, 54–56; model minority against, 92. *See also* Korean-Black relationships
Black/South Asian relations, 20, 21, 24, 34; Malabar on, 27; prejudices within, 59–63
"Blood Brothers," 17, 25–26, 35, 96
Bob Marley and the Wailers, 6. *See also* Marley, Bob
*bodegas* (small family shops), 7
boioing (hop/jump), 34, 39n3
Boots Riley, 8
*Breakin'*, 138
Britain, New York City v., 66m10
*Broken World*, 135
Brook, Peter, 3
brown liberation, ix–x
*Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*, 79–80; for community, 103–4; screening of, 103. *See also* Nijhon, Raeshem Chopra
*Brown Sugar*, 109

career choice, as politics, 14
CarriÈre, Jean-Claude, 3
caste, 61, 62–63
Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 45
Chand, Sammy, 95–96
change, for cultures, 9
Chang, Jeff, viii, x, 6
chastity, of women, 48
Chicago, 43
childhood, 87, 109–11, 127–31. *See also* Hajela, Deepti
children of '65, 11; for professionalism, 13–14; as South Asian Americans, 12–13
Chinese Americans, 92
Chirag (Chee Malabar), 18
Chuck D, 7, 48, 74, 111
Chyango (Korean drum), 37–38
citizenship, 66m8. *See also* Thind, Bhagat Singh
civil rights: immigration reform for, 37; *Middle Passage* for, 101–2
Civil Rights Act, 10, 92
class: age and, 58–59; alienation and, 63–64; gender and, 51; "homeboy" and, 48–49; marriage and, 51; masculinity and, 51–52; in model minorities, 36–37; after 9/11, 59; race and, 75, 80
clothes, viii
Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence, 12
Cold Duck Complex, 18
college(s): for ethnic identity, 56; hip-hop in, 115–19; racial politics in, 57–58
color, immigration and, 36
Combs, Sean (Puff Daddy, P. Diddy, Diddy), 23, 137–38
commodification: of hip-hop, 14, 23, 120–21; of identity, xiii–xiv
commodity fetishism, 53
community: *Brown like Dat* for, 103–4; in diaspora, 94–95
community organizations, 8. *See also* South Asian American organizations
competition, Asian-Black, 20–21
Conscious hip-hop, 8
consumption: as objectification, 53; race and, 42; for status, 46
"cool," race and, 54–56
copyright laws, 53
cost, of parties, 44
The Coup, 8

crime, immigration and, 37
culpability, 8
cultural appropriation, 53
"cultural defense," 11
cultural identity, 33–34
culture(s): of African Americans, 49; change for, 9; conflation of, 82; for employment, 52; globalization of, 54; isolationism of, 4–5; politics of, 9; power and, 9; relationships between, 9–10. *See also* polyculturalism; "youth subculture"
Cypress Hill, 24

dance, 74; ethnicity in, 44–45, 56
deejays, 65n4; gender of, 53; men of color as, 52. *See also* DJs
Def, Mos, 84
Def Poetry Jam, 84–85
De La Soul, 74
Desi(s): caste for, 61, 62–63; definition of, xivn1, 42; for hip-hop, 23–24; homophobia for, x; nightclubs for, 17–18; "party scene" for, 43–44; for politics, 34; racism for, vii–x, 128
Desi Hits, 104
*Desis in the House* (Maira), 83
*dhol* (drum), 25
diaspora: artist, 136; community in, 94–95; gender in, 93
Diasporadics, 81–82, 147n2
Diddy, 23, 137–38
Direct Action for Rights and Equality, 10
"dissin'," 89
diversity, 19–20. *See also* multiculturalism
DJs, 119–20. *See also* Baby Face; Bella; Jazzy Jeff; Key Kool; Rekha; Siraiki; Tony
D'Lo, 14, 21, 137–47; interview with, 82, 100; performance of, 84–85, 105n2; for psychosexuality, xii; as transgender, 83–84; on women, 81
documentary: Ambudkar in, 99; gender v., 91; Himalayan Project for, 86–87; Jugular for, 97–98; Karmacy for, 91–92; Maira for, 100; Malabar for, 86–87, 90–91. *See also Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*; Nijhon, Raeshem Chopra
dosais, 110, 121n2
Dotbuster attacks, 12, 62
drugs, 7; police brutality and, 7–8. *See also* gangs
D'Souza, Dinesh, viii, 61–62
Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 111
Durrani, Nusrat, 104

economics, 23–24. *See also* cost; income; labor needs; money; poverty
education: of Indian Americans, vii; multiculturalism in, 4; racism in, 5; for social consciousness, 80. *See also* Asian American studies; school curricula; techno-professionals
Education = Multicultural Curriculum (E=MC2), 10
emasculation, machismo v., 50
E=MC2. *See* Education = Multicultural Curriculum
emcees. *See* MCs; Shah, Swapnil
"Emerging Voices" (Aafreen), 85
Eminem, 137, 138
employment: culture for, 52–53; for South Asians, 45
empowerment: hip-hop for, xii, 71–77, 88–89; Nijhon on, xi
*The End of Racism* (D'Souza), viii, 61–62
Eno, Brian, 6
Eric B., viii, 9
Espiritu, Yen Le, 12
ethnic hip-hop, 18, 24–28
ethnic identity: with Blacks, 54–56; college for, 56; for Karmacy, 25; Malabar v., 26–27; Rawj v., 26–27
ethnicity: in assimilation, 20; in dance, 44–45; preservation of, 19; for women, 47. *See also* panethnic groups
ethnicity/race, 58
ethnic slurs, xii–xiii
"Euphoria," 96

Fair, Emma, 8
family, 133. *See also* caste; Nair families
fashion, 112–13; hybrid, 44–45. *See also* clothes
father, 133
Fat Man Scoop, 25
Feenom Circle, 26
"Fight the Power," viii
films. *See Breakin'*; *Brown Sugar*; documentary; *Gandhi*
flowing, 131
Freestyle Fellowship, 131
freestyle rap, xii–xiii
Furious Five, vii–viii
"fusion hip-hop," 96–97

*Gandhi*, 111
Gandhi, Mahatma, 5, 93, 94
Gandhi, Rajiv, 147n1
gangs, 7
"gangsta girl," 47
gangsta rap, 8, 23–24
"garage sound," 112
Garvey, Marcus, 117
gay organizations, 12
gender: class and, 51; of deejays, 53; in diaspora, 93; documentary v., 91. *See also* men; transgender; women
generations: music and, 59–60; post–9/11 politics, 62. *See also* alienation
genetics, 37
globalization, 54
Gore, Tipper, 23–24
graffiti artists, 7
Grandmaster Flash, vii–viii, 23
Gujarati, 25–26, 35
Gupta, Monisha Das, 12

Hajela, Deepti, 71–77
Hall, Perry, 49
*hang*, 25
Hieroglyphics, 131
Himalayan Project, 21, 27, 101–2; for documentary, 86–87; formation of, 131–32. *See also* Malabar, Chee
Hindus, 5, 36, 77, 110, 116, 130, 145, 150. *See also* Sikhs
Hindu Whites, 60
hip-hop, 46; for activism, viii, xii; for awakening, 75; with bhangra, xiii; clothes, viii; in college, 115–19; commodification of, 14, 120–21; Desis for, 23–24; for empowerment, xii, 71–77, 88–89; epistemology of, 6–10; ethnic, 18, 24–28; history of, 6, 23–24; for identity, viii–ix, 24–25, 49–50, 111–20, 129–37; industries of, 22; information from, 48; for knowledge, 126; as language, 48; for lesbians, xii; model minority v., ix; money and, 120; MTV for, 22; multiculturalism and, 6–7, 28–29; after 9/11, 90–91; politics and, 23–24, 27–28; polyculturalism and, 8–10; power of, 138; racial, 24–28; racialization and, x; religion and, 130; scholars of, 19; transformation for, 6–7; types of, 26–27; for voice, viii, 126; Whites for, 48, 50, 63; women within, 81–86. *See also* ethnic hip-hop; "fusion hip-hop"; racialized hip-hop
hip-hop artists, 21–22. *See also specific hip-hop artists*
hip-hop fans, 55–56. *See also* partygoers
hip-hop head, 21, 30n11
Hisama, Ellie, 34
Hoch, Danny, 52–53
"homeboy," 48–49
homophobia: for Desis, x; West against, 147n6
homosexuality, 83. *See also* gay organizations; lesbians
"hoochy mamas," 48
Hop 97FM, 25
"Horizons," 38
House Bill 4427 (Sensenbrenner-King Bill), 37

Ice Cube, 24, 129–30
"idealized White masculinity," 66n6

identity: activism as, 13; for artists, 25, 28, 30n13, 30n16; Blackness in, 49–50; commodification of, xiii–xiv; cultural, 33–34; exclusivity of, 84; father for, 133; hip-hop for, viii–ix, 24–25, 49–50, 111–20, 129–37; "Indianness" for, 116; invisibility in, xiii; Prashad on, x–xi; race and, 66n10. *See also* Balaji, Murali; Model-minority myth
idli, 110, 121n2
immigrants: 9/11 against, 35–36; South Asian, vii, 10–11; undocumented, 36–37. *See also* children of '65; Desi(s); "Justice for Mr. Jiang"
immigration: color and, 36; reform for, 37, 94; Whites and, 57
Immigration Act of 1965, 37
income, vii
India: Pakistan v., 42; United States v., 130
Indian American(s), 42, 65n1; assimilation models for, 19; businesses of, 12; childhood of, 87, 109–11; citizenship for, 66m8; education of, vii; empowerment of, 71–77; income of, vii; population of, 65n5
Indian Business Association, 12
Indian culture, 5. *See also* Hindus
"Indianness": Black v., 97–102; for identity, 116
"Internal Reflection," 109, 117
invisibility, xiii
Iran-Iraq War, 112
Islam, women in, 85–86. *See also* Muslim Americans
isolationism, of cultures, 4–5
"It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back," 24, 71
"I Used to Love H.E.R.," 23

Jackson, Michael, 34
*Jails, Hospitals, and Hip Hop* (Hoch), 52–53
Jam-On, 33
Japanese, 55
Jay-Z, 137–38
Jazzy Jeff, 111
Jiang, Zhenxing, 38
Joel, Billy, 85
Jugular, 14; for documentary, 97–98
"Justice for Mr. Jiang," 38

Kabir, 79, 97–98
Karmacy, 17–18, 19, 21, 26, 35, 38; for documentary, 91–92; ethnic identity for, 25, 100; skepticism for, 95–96. *See also* Shah, Swapnil
*The Karma of Brown Folk* (Prashad), 37, 61, 93
KB, 91–92, 93
Kellner, Douglas, 63
Kelly, Robin, 52
Key Kool, 43, 65n3
Knitting Factory, 17–18, 25, 26
knowledge, hip-hop for, 126
Kondo, Dorinne, 43
Korean-Black relationships, 20
Kothari, Pradip "Peter," 12
KRS-1, viii
*Kung Fu Meets the Dragon*, 6
Kweli, Talib, 14

labor needs, 37
Lahiri, Jhumpa, vii
language: hip-hop as, 48; for rap, 133–34. *See also* Gujarati
*La Racisme* (Memmi), 5
The Late Show with David Letterman, 87–88
Lazarus, Emma, 28, 30n15
Lease Drivers Coalition (New York Taxi Worker's Alliance), 12
legal status, 36
lesbian organizations, 12
lesbians, xii. *See also* D'Lo
*Lethal Injection*, 130
*Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*, 9

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), 147n1
Lipsitz, George, 46, 63
Love, Monie, 138
LTTE. *See* Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
lyrics, 74; homophobia in, 147n6. *See also* flowing

machismo, 50
MaddBuddha, 66n7
*The Mahabharata*, 3
Maira, Sunaina, 12–13, 41–69, 83; for documentary, 100; on race, xi
Majors, Lee, 118–19
Malabar, Chee, 14, 18–19, 21, 36, 127–36; on alienation, xii; on Black/South Asian relations, 27; for documentary, 86–87, 90–91; ethnic identity v., 26–27; on "Indianness," 100; on *Middle Passage*, 101
Manavi, 11
Mandela, Nelson, 112
Marley, Bob (Robert Nesta Marley), 28
marriage, 26; class and, 51
masculinity, 48; class and, 51–52; stability and, 51; tradition and, 51–52. *See also* "idealized White masculinity"
Mathew, Biju, 12
MCs, xiii, 17, 21, 25, 27; battle for, 89–90; test of, 89. *See also* Ambudkar, Utkarsh; *Brown like Dat: South Asians and Hip-Hop*; Kabir; Malabar, Chee
Melnick, Jeffrey, 58
Memmi, Albert, 5
men: emasculation of, 87; in hip-hop, 86–91. *See also* homophobia; machismo
Method Man, 8
Middle Eastern culture, 65n2
*The Middle Passage*, 27–28, 101–2, 127, 129, 132; development of, 134
Midnight's Children (Rushdie), 133–34
Miller, Daniel, 53
model minority(ies): class in, 36–37; hip-hop v., ix; myth of, 91–95; Okihiro on, 54–55; Prashad on, 92–93; South Asian Americans as, viii, ix, xi, 14, 20, 34, 36–37, 42, 54–55, 62, 80; violence and, 62
model-minority myth, 91–95
Mody, Navroze, 12
money, 120
Morrison, Toni, 60
"Mosh," 137
MTV, 22
MTV Desi network, vii, 104
Mujibur, 87–88
multiculturalism: for diversity, 19–20; in education, 4, 116; hierarchy within, 5; hip-hop and, 6–7, 28–29; norms in, 5; theatre and, 3–4
music: gender in, 53; for rebellion, 63; social spaces in, 44. *See also* bhangra; rap
music/race, 58
Muslim Americans, 59, 62, 64

Nair, Ajay, xi, 33–40
Nair families, 33, 39n1
Nair Malayalee, 33, 39n2
Native Americans, 59, 116, 121n4. *See also* Apache Indian
*Native Tongh* (MaddBuddha), 66n7
naturalization laws, 66m9
near-Whites, 52, 54–55
NETSAP. *See* Network of South Asian Professionals
Network of South Asian Professionals (NETSAP), 13
Newcleus, 33
"New Immigrants, New Forms of Transnational Identity" (Shukla), 94
New York City: Britain v., 66m10; Desis in, 42, 65n1; Indian American population in, 45, 65n5; partygoers in, 44–45; remix in, 43, 49–50. *See also* Lease Drivers Coalition
*New York Times Magazine*, 44

nightclubs: for Desis, 17–18; subcultures and, 44; theme nights at, 44. *See also specific nightclubs*
Nijhon, Raeshem Chopra, 79–107; on empowerment, xi; skepticism for, 96
9/11: class after, 59; ethnicity after, 57; hip-hop after, 90–91; immigration after, 35–36; Muslim Americans after, 62; religion after, 59. *See also Oblique Brown*; post–9/11 politics; Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement
"No Reservations," ix
norms, in multiculturalism, 5
Northwestern University Panel on South Asians in Hip-Hop, 100–101
"Nuthin' Nice," 132
N.W.A., viii, 24, 74

Obama, Barack, 126
objectification, consumption as, 53
*Oblique Brown* (album), 18, 135
"Oblique Brown" (song), 27, 36, 135
Okihiro, Gary, 53–55
Omatsu, Glenn, 35
Omi, Michael, 55
Orientalism, 82
Outernational, 14
"Outkasted," 92, 96

Pakistan, 42–43. *See also* Abstract Vision/Humanity; Ambudkar, Utkarsh
panethnic groups, 12
partygoers, 44–45
party promoters, 44
"party scene," 43–44
Penn, Kal, vii
Perkins, William Eric, 89
Perry, Lee "Scratch," 6
phenotype, 21
police brutality, 7; drugs and, 7–8
politics: art for, 137–38; of authenticity, 54; career choice as, 14; of culture, 9; Desis for, 34; hip-hop and, 23–24, 27–28; for panethnic groups, 12; post–9/11, 62. *See also* racial politics; *specific hip-hop artists*
politics of refusal, 7
polyculturalism: for Asian American studies, 35; hip-hop and, 8–10; at protest, 38; Sharma on, xi
polycultural power, x–xiv
post–9/11 politics, 62
poverty, 75
power: culture and, 9; of hip-hop, 138; polycultural, x–xiv; race and, 20; stereotypes and, 9. *See also* empowerment
Prashad, Vijay, 37, 61; against categorization, x–xi, 3–15, 35; on identity, x–xi; on model minority, 92–93
protest, 38
psychosexuality, xii
Public Enemy, viii, 24, 71, 111, 129, 138
*pujas* (prayer), 110
punk music, 6
Purkayastha, Bandana, 12–13

*Quarter-Life Crisis*, 25
Queen Latifah, 138

race: age and, 58; in assimilation, 20; chastity and, 48; class and, 75, 80; consumption and, 42; "cool" and, 54–56; hip-hop and, 21, 66n7; identity and, 66n10; for Japanese, 55; for legal status, 36; Maira on, xi; power and, 20; in remix youth culture, 58; sexuality and, 49–51; slavery and, 27–28. *See also* Blacks; Chinese Americans; Japanese; Native Americans; near-Whites; South Asian Americans; Whites; "wiggers"
racial hip-hop, 24–28
racialization, x
racialized hip-hop, 19
racial polarity, 54–55
racial politics, 57–58

racism, 61–62; Black, 101; in childhood, 110–11; for Desis, vii–x, 128; in education, 5; in religion, 130; South Asian immigrants and, vii, 10–11; in theatre, 3. *See also* ethnic slurs; Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement; *specific hip-hop artists*
radio, 6
Rakim, viii, 9
Ramamurthy, Senthil, vii
rap, 133–34
rappers: sexuality and, 66n6; South Asian, 28–29. *See also* Jay-Z; Majors, Lee; Malabar, Chee; Rawj; Redman; Sermon, Eric
"Rapper's Delight," 23
Raptivism, 8, 13
Rawj, 26–27
rebellion, music for, 63, 64. *See also* protest
Redman, 82
Rekha, 163–69; on Basement, xiii; stereotypes v., 85; on women, 83
religion: hip-hop and, 130; after 9/11, 59. *See also* Hindus; Islam; Muslim Americans; *pujas*; Sikhs
remix, 43, 49–50. *See also* bhangra remix
remix youth culture, 58
*Revenge*, 33
*Revolution Dub*, 6
"Rez" (reservation), 116, 121n4
riots, 130
*Roast Fish, Collie Weed & Corn Bread*, 6
Roediger, David, 49, 50
"A Room of One's Own" (Woolf), 147n5
Rose, Tricia, 46
Ross, Andrew, 58
Roxy Music, 6
Rudrappa, Sharmila, 11
Rukus Avenue, 96
Run DMC, 89
Rushdie, Salman, 85, 133–34
Russell, John, 55
Ryan, Michael, 63
Sagoo, Bally, 53
Sakhi for South Asian Women, 11, 12
Salmon, Acquan, 7–8
Sammy, 25, 28
Sandeep, 17, 25
SASA. *See* South Asian Student's Association
school curricula, multiculturalism for, 19–20
Sermon, Eric, 82
sexuality: Middle Eastern culture and, 65n2; race and, 49–51; rappers and, 66n6. *See also* homosexuality; machismo; psychosexuality
sexual objects, women as, 82–83
Shah, Swapnil, xi–xii, 125–26
Sharan, Kaushal, 12
Sharma, Nitasha Tamar, 17–31, 100; on Black racism, 101; on cultures' conflation, 82; on hip-hop fans, 55–56; on polyculturalism, xi
Sharma, Sanjay, 66n10
Shukla, Sandya, 94
Sikhs, 59
Simmons, Russell, 84, 137
*The Simpsons*, 88
Singh, Amritjit, 61, 62–63
Sin Sin, 89–90
Siraiki, 47
Sirajul, 87–88
skepticism: for Karmacy, 95–96; for Nijhon, 96
slavery, 27–28
Small, Biggie, 115
Sneha, 11
S.O.B.'s, 43–44, 105n5
social consciousness, 80
social relationships, 53. *See also* Black/South Asian relations; Korean-Black relationships
social spaces, in music, 44
Sony, 53
South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow, 12, 36

South Asian American organizations: for immigration reform, 37; segmentation of, 12–13
South Asian Americans: African Americans v., x; as model minority, viii, ix, xi, 14, 20, 34, 36–37, 42, 54–55, 62, 80; politicization of, 23–24; visibility of, 80–81. *See also* Desi(s)
South Asian immigrants, vii, 10–11
South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, 12
South Asian Public Health Associates, 13
South Asians for Choice, 13
South Asian students, 57–58. *See also* *specific hip-hop artists*
South Asian Student's Association (SASA), 10, 13
South Asian Workers Project, 12
southern rap, 117–18
stability, masculinity and, 51
Stallybrass, Peter, 64
Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM), 65
Statue of Liberty, 93–94
status: consumption for, 46; legal, 36. *See also* class
stereotypes: power and, 9; Rekha v., 85; of terrorists, 90–91; of women, 81. *See also* Model-minority myth
Stokes, Martin, 44
STORM. *See* Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement
structural alienation, 63
Stuart, Charles, 112
Students Against Apartheid, 5
subcultural affiliation, 46–47
subcultures, 44. *See also* "youth subculture"
Sugar Hill Gang, 23
*Super Ape*, 6
Supreme Court: on citizenship, 66m8; against Hindus, 36; against Thind, 57
Supriya, K. E., 11
*tabla*, 25
techno-professionals, 94
terrorists, 90–91. *See also* War on Terror
the1shanti, xii–xiii, 149–54
theatre, 3
Thind, Bhagat Singh, 36, 57, 66m9
*TIME Magazine*, 88
Tony, 43
tradition: masculinity and, 51–52; women and, 83, 85
transgender, 83–84
Trikone, 12
TS Soundz, 43
Tucker, C. Dolores, 23–24
Tupac, 115
2002 Diasporadics, 81–82, 147n2

United States, India v., 130. *See also* Supreme Court
Utkarsh. *See* Ambudkar, Utkarsh

Vanilla Ice (Robert Van Winkle), 111–12, 121n3
Viacom, xiii–xiv
violence, 128; on Indian American businesses, 12; model minorities and, 62; to women, 11. *See also* Dotbuster attacks; Iran-Iraq War; riots; terrorists; War on Terror
Visweswaran, Kamala, 57
voice, hip-hop for, viii, 126

Wang, Oliver, 50, 66n6
War on Terror, 64
West, Kanye, 147n6
"When I Get To Heaven," 130
White, Allon, 64
White America, 61
Whites: for hip-hop, 48, 50, 63; immigration and, 57. *See also* "idealized White masculinity"; near-Whites; "wiggers"
white supremacy, 4
"wiggers" (White niggers), 49, 113

Wimsatt, William Upski, 14
Winant, Howard, 55
*Wince at the Sun*, 134
Winkle, Robert Van (Vanilla Ice), 112, 121n3
women: chastity of, 48; ethnicity for, 47; groups for, 11, 12; within hip-hop, 81–86; “hoochy mamas” as, 48; in Islam, 85–86; as sexual objects, 82–83; stereotypes of, 81; tradition and, 83, 85; violence to, 11. *See also* B-Girl Be; D’Lo; Maira, Sunaina; masculinity; Rekha; Sharma, Nitasha Tamar; Woolf, Virginia
Wood, Joe, 55
Woolf, Virginia, 147n5
Worker’s Awaaz, 12

*Yo! MTV Raps*, 22, 139
Young Communist League, 8
Youth Against Racism, 62
“youth subculture,” 45–46

Zizek, 53

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**Raeshem Chopra Nijhon** is a filmmaker and TV producer. She is the Director of the critically acclaimed documentary, *Brown Like Dat*: South Asians and Hip-Hop.

**Swapnil Shah** is part of the pioneering hip-hop group Karmacy. He has been active in hip-hop for over two decades and has been involved in numerous community causes.

**Chee Malabar** has enjoyed underground success as a solo artist and as part of the two-man rap group, the Himalayan Project. Malabar has appeared on MTV Desi and has generated critical acclaim for his album Oblique Brown. He lives in California and is active in community organizations.

Described as a "jolt of creative and comedic energy," **D'Lo** is an artist and producer whose work sheds light on brutality, justice, AIDS, sexuality, political and social unrest and division along ethnic and gender lines. D'Lo is a teaching artist and has performed and held workshops extensively throughout the United States and Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, Sri Lanka and India.

**The1shanti** has been a rapper since the age of 12, meeting such luminaries as Doug E. Fresh and Afrika Bambaata, who gave him the title of India Bambaata. In addition to his solo work, the1shanti has performed with the acclaimed group The Dum Dum Project.

Actor and rapper **Utkarsh Ambudkar** credited his music-loving family for his immersion into different styles, including hip-hop, at a young age. Ambudkar is a former MTV Desi VJ and has appeared in several films, including the critically acclaimed *Rocket Science*.

For more than a decade, **DJ Rekha** has been in the vanguard of South Asian American music activism, making Basement Bhangra a household name among Desis and non-Desis alike. Having performed with such music luminaries as the Roots, Outkast, Devo and most recently, Sri Lankan-born M.I.A., Rekha has cemented her status as one of the premier figures in the Desi music scene. In 2004, *Newsweek* named her one of the most influential South Asians in the United States.